

**THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL**

**THE “LOST” BATTLE OF MERSA EL  
BREGA  
LIBYAN DESERT 31 MARCH 1941**

**Being a thesis submitted for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
In the University of Hull**

**BY**

**NORMAN KENNETH MURPHY B.A., M.A.**

NOVEMBER 2011

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is true to say that this thesis would not have been written without the help and support of several individuals and institutions. I should therefore here like to thank those who assisted me in this endeavor. My first thanks must go to my supervisor Dr David Lonsdale. Without whose unstinting advice and encouragement this work could not have been written. His helpful, and often much needed guidance, kept me focused on the task in hand, when I could so easily have gone astray.

I must also pay tribute to my friends who have listened tirelessly to my endless references to the events chronicled in the work. Prominent among these are my work colleague and friend Leigh Emerson who listen patiently to rereads of extracts from the work on an almost daily basis for three years. Also in this regard I must thank Phil Kershaw for his practical help and for at least pretending to be interested in the detailed workings of British, as opposed to Italian, tanks.

My thanks must also go to the staff of several institutions. First among these are the staff of Scarborough Library who always went the extra mile to search out some obscure book for me. Likewise gratitude must go to the staff at the Liddell-Centre, Imperial War Museum, and Public Records Office who were all equally helpful.

Lastly I must thank my wife Eileen for her patients, understanding, and the support she has given me, throughout the writing of this work. Indeed she has marched up and down so many sand dunes with me that she deserves a campaign medal.

## Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	7
METHODOLOGY.....	9
METHODICAL INTRODUCTION .....	10
UNDERPINNING THE METHOD OF RESEARCH .....	12
EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH.....	15
SECONDARY SOURCES .....	19
ASSEMBLING SOURCES .....	20
ACCESSING SOURCES: ARCHIVAL RESEARCH .....	23
COMMAND AND COMMANDERS IN CONTEXT.....	26
REFERENCE TO THE LITERATURE ON COMMAND.....	27
CONTRADICTIONS: TERRAIN AND UNIT AVAILABILITY .....	32
UNIT DEPLOYMENT AND CAPABILITY .....	37
CONCLUSION .....	39
 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	 39
MAJOR-GENERAL HENRY ROWAN-ROBINSON .....	42
CORRELLI BARNETT.....	46
JOHN CONNELL.....	48
MORE GENERAL READING.....	51
 ELEMENTS OF COMMAND .....	 63
INTRODUCTION.....	63
SUBORDINATE COMMAND .....	67
ARMY ORGANISATION.....	68
U.S. 88 <sup>th</sup> INFANTRY DIVISION.....	70
SO WHAT MAKES A COMPETENT COMMANDER? .....	72
PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES AND TRAITS .....	72
WORKING WITH THE SYSTEM.....	77
CONCLUSION .....	80
 CHAPTER 1.....	 82
BRITAIN'S POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA.....	82
A TENUOUS GRIP .....	84
GENERAL WAVELL: SCHOLAR AND SOLDIER?.....	89
G.O.C. MIDDLE EAST 1939 .....	89
A BASE IS BORN .....	91

FUEL.....	92
TRANSPORT .....	92
HOBART ARRIVES .....	94
WILSON ARRIVES .....	95
PLANS FOR ATTACK .....	99
FRANCE FALLS ITALY ENTERS THE WAR.....	102
WAVELL IS CALLED HOME.....	105
 CHAPTER 2.....	 114
INTRODUCTION.....	114
THE FIRST THREE DAYS .....	118
THE EXCHANGE OF 4 INDIAN & 6 AUSTRALIAN DIVISIONS.....	120
SHIPPING.....	122
4 INDIAN: CHARACTER, TRAINING & ADMINISTRATION.....	123
SPEED .....	125
LOGISTICS .....	126
WAVELL'S LUCK HOLDS .....	129
INEVITABLE PROBLEMS .....	130
WATER .....	132
BARDIA: THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN VICTORY.....	133
TOBRUK .....	135
THE GEOGRAPHY .....	137
THE SPOILS OF WAR .....	141
THE LOST OPPORTUNITY: .....	143
ATTACK TURNS TO DEFENCE .....	146
THE OPPOSITION & TIMING .....	149
MILITARY LOGISTICS .....	150
THE NAVY AND RAF .....	154
PRELUDE TO DISASTER: ADVANCE TURNS TO DEFENCE.....	156
THE WIND OF CHANGE .....	158
WAVELL'S GREEK TRAGEDY:.....	160
CHANGE OF PLAN IN THE DESERT.....	173
NEAME TAKES COMMAND: THE POISONED CHALLIS .....	174
WAVELL'S VIEW: INTELLIGENCE .....	175
FEBRUARY BRINGS THE WEHRMACHT .....	180
POST LATE FEBRUARY.....	181
 CHAPTER 3.....	 184
NEAME AND HIS ARMoured DIVISION .....	184

2 <sup>nd</sup> ARMoured DIVISION.....	187
3 <sup>rd</sup> ARMoured BRIGADE .....	189
3 HUSSARS.....	191
A PASSAGE TO EGYPT .....	192
CHRISTMAS 1940.....	193
WHERE HAVE ALL THE TANKS GONE.....	197
6 ROYAL TANK REGIMENT .....	201
5 ROYAL TANK REGIMENT .....	204
1 <sup>st</sup> REGIMENT ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY .....	206
THE 2 <sup>nd</sup> SUPPORT GROUP .....	207
9 <sup>th</sup> BATTALION THE RILE BRIGADE.....	207
MACHINE GUNNERS PAR EXCELLENCE: 1 <sup>st</sup> NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS .....	208
ANTI-TANK GUNNERS: 3 <sup>rd</sup> REGIMENT, ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY .....	210
104 <sup>th</sup> REGIMENT ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY .....	212
CREDITABLE INTELLIGENCE .....	215
WAVELL ASSESSES THE SITUATION .....	219
WAVELL SAVES THE ARMOUR? .....	227
CAIRO REFLECTIONS.....	231
ITALIAN TANKS .....	236
5 RTR.....	240
FINAL DISPOSITIONS OF 3AB.....	243
2 <sup>nd</sup> SUPPORT GROUP .....	244
THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLDING BREGA .....	246
THE BRITISH DEFENCE. THE TERRAIN.....	248
DEPLOYMENT.....	252
THE GERMANS TURN UP THE HEAT .....	255
THE GERMANS PREPARE FOR ATTACK .....	258
30/31 MARCH DEPLOYMENT: THE TAKING OF BREGA.....	261
THE BATTLE BEGINS .....	262
 CHAPTER 4.....	 275
THERE WAS NOTHING INEVITABLE ABOUT DEFEAT AT BREGA.....	276
WATER .....	278
FOOD.....	283
FUEL.....	289
AMMUNITION/MINES.....	292
DUMPS .....	294
TRANSPORT .....	295
BUILDING A FORCE TO DEFEND BREGA .....	298
ARMoured CARS.....	299

ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS .....	302
15 LAA .....	305
6 LAA .....	306
DEPLOYMENT .....	306
ARTILLERY .....	308
ANTI-TANK GUNS .....	314
MACHINE GUN BATTALION .....	316
INFANTRY .....	317
ARMOUR .....	321
AIR POWER .....	323
OVERVIEW .....	327
 CHAPTER 5.....	 333
CONCLUSION .....	333
BIBLIOGRAPHY/WORKS CONSULTED .....	353

Liddell Hart was to write in 1950: *Lord Wavell's star rose high at an early stage of the war. Its glow was the more brilliant because of the darkness of the sky. His victories over the Italian armies in North Africa and East Africa in the winter of 1940-41, were Britain's first striking success after the catastrophic run of defeats in the West. They came as a great tonic – not only to the British people but even more to others who had been shocked and alarmed by the apparently irresistible advance of the Nazi and Fascist dictators.*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In central Libya on the border between the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, on 31 March 1941, a battalion of British infantry supported by a regiment of field artillery were occupying hastily constructed defensive positions in front of the small fishing village of Mersa el Brega. These meagre forces were according to General Archibald Percival Wavell the then Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C)<sup>2</sup> of all British forces in the Middle East all that could be found to defend what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, called, Britain's "Desert Flank" 'the peg on which all else hung'.<sup>3</sup>

The all-else upon which Churchill considered everything hung was, in fact, the lifeblood of any modern army, oil, without which it would be almost impossible for Britain to continue fighting the war. 'For the British the Middle East was only just less important to the waging of the war than their homeland; for it contained round Mosul, in Iraq, and at the head of the Persian Gulf the oilfields without which the Royal Air Force, the Army and the Royal Navy would be paralysed'.<sup>4</sup> Although Britain was not wholly dependent on Middle Eastern oil to supply the home island with fuel; its forces in the Middle East certainly relied on local sources.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as Wavell correctly observed in May 1940; 'Germany was short of oil and its naval power was not equal to

---

<sup>1</sup> Harold E. Raugh, Jr. quoting Basil Liddell-Hart, found in *Wavell in the Middle East* (London: Brassey's 1993) p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Woollcombe, *The Campaigns of Wavell 1939-1943* (London: Cassell, 1959) p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War Volume III* (London: Cassell & Co, 1950) p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (London: William Kimber & Co, 1960) p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Len Deighton, *Blood, Tears & Folly* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993) p. 498.

that of the Allies; unless Germany could obtain oil in sufficient quantity, Germany could not pursue the war. To win the war, therefore, Britain needed to focus on preventing Germany from obtaining oil'.<sup>6</sup>

Churchill understood perfectly Wavell's logic in regard to Britain's need to deny her enemy Middle Eastern oil. Furthermore, he recognised that if the enemy defeated the British forces in the Western Desert he might, if he was able to exploit his initial success, push on through the Libyan/Egyptian desert and jeopardise Britain's oil supplies coming from the Middle East. He recognised that such an advance would threaten Egypt, the Suez Canal and ultimately the oilfields of Mosul and Arabia. Churchill realised that if this eventuality occurred, and the enemy gained control of the Middle East's oil, then Britain's war waging capacity would quite quickly grind to a fuel starved halt. Moreover, Germany's oil requirements would be amply satisfied. There was, therefore, according to Churchill, 'no idea in any quarter of losing or risking that [the "Desert Flank"] for the sake of Greece or anything in the Balkans'.<sup>7</sup>

However, despite Wavell's and Churchill's fears and warnings of how disastrous an enemy breakthrough on the "Desert Flank" would be, because of the inadequacy of the defence at Brega this was exactly what was allowed to happen. In the early morning of 31 March 1941 a large German force attacked the defenders of British interests in the vital Middle East. Rommel was to write; 'our attack moved forward against the British positions at Mersa el Brega, and a fierce engagement took place'.<sup>8</sup> The approximately six hundred young infantry men, mostly recruited from Tower Hamlets in London's East End, fought doggedly most of the day to defend Churchill's "Desert Flank". However, by late afternoon these troops under relentless pressure, alone and unsupported, were forced to abandon their positions. 'By 6 April, 1941, with most of

---

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Schofield, *Wavell: Soldier & Statesman* (London: John Murray, 2006) p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War Volume III*, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Lewin, *Rommel as a Military Commander* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004) p. 33.



the senior commanders captured, the British forces in what had so recently been the quiet backwater of Cyrenaica were now headless as well as disjointed. Benghazi and the Jebel Akhadar had fallen; Tobruk formed a precarious rock amid the rising German tide'.<sup>9</sup> The British withdrawal from Brega opened the way for the Germans and their Italian allies to gain access to the road to Cairo, Suez Canal and potentially the oilfields beyond.

So why, when the consequences of defeat at Brega were so ruinous, was the enemy allowed to succeed? In an effort to answer this question this thesis will focus of four separate areas of research which, when brought together collectively, will hopefully explain why the British were defeated at Brega. Firstly the work will seek to establish how command and command structures functioned in WWII. Secondly the thesis will review why, when the consequences of failure at Brega were so great, the very situation Churchill and others foresaw, and indeed warned of, was allowed to happen. The works third objective will seek to establish whether the various reasons put forward by Middle East Command for the loss of Brega stand up to scrutiny. Fourthly the work will endeavour to establish whether a creditable military force could have been provided to defend Brega adequately and thus avert the defeat.

## METHODOLOGY

*Stephen Spender the British novelist and essayist wrote; 'History is the ship carrying living memories to the future.' However, to bring the ship of memories to the future, to chart a course that will hopefully deliver the memories accurately and cogently to future readers, rigorous methods of research need to be employed. In this regard, as we shall see, the river of history upon which the ship sails to the wide ocean of discovery is long and meandering, sometimes slow and peaceful, sometimes raging and fierce but always exciting to navigate.*

---

<sup>9</sup> Barnett, p. 67.

## **METHODOICAL INTRODUCTION**

This section of the work will seek to illustrate for the reader how this research project was designed and how the various research methods employed were used to support the conclusions reached. Looking at the focus of the project, the “lost” Battle of Mersa el Brega, we may see that certain facts, although few in number, are readily available and are, perhaps, self explanatory. We know for example that the battle was fought on 31 March 1941 at a place called Mersa el Brega, and the main protagonists involved were primarily British and German forces; and we know that the battle was lost by the British.

However, considering the devastating consequences which followed on from the defeat at Brega for the British this degree of information seemed to the author to be a rather scant appraisal of what by any yardstick was a pivotal battle. Consequently in order to establish how and why events evolved as they did at Brega a research framework was designed to answer several, key, and many peripheral, questions.

The problems needing answers were considerable. Why, for example, were the British so ill prepared to defend Brega? Why, when the consequences of failure were so dire, conceivably the loss of the Middle East and its precious oil, were not adequate resources brought to bear? Were adequate forces available, if not why not, if they were why were they not at Brega? Even had resources been available was the Brega position defensible? Was the defeat made possible because the British were surprised; was there a lapse of intelligence? Might the loss of Brega be the result of poor command and poor command decisions? Or was there some systemic flaw in British tactics? All these questions, and many more, were tabulated into a step by step research brief designed to establish the “truth” behind the defeat.

To achieve the goals set out above various research stratagems and methods have been employed. The importance of undertaking extensive background reading was

acknowledged and has been practised assiduously throughout this research project. The information gained from the huge quantity of secondary sources referenced formed what might be described as the armature around which the many threads of the research have been wound. Indeed although the thrust of the research has been focused on a battle which has been virtually ignored by successive historians; the work has been enhanced and informed enormously by an awareness of what other authors have thought and written about the war in the desert. Moreover, as the research progressed engaging with a wide range of critical and diverse opinions uncovered various, and in some cases almost diametrically opposed, interpretations of what were essentially the same events.

The above being said in virtually all cases the secondary sources accessed beneficially informed the research to some degree or other. However, it is recognised that even the most scrupulous and thorough secondary source must be assessed critically as the views expressed are often influenced by the authors own understanding and relationship with the personalities or events being referenced. This factor has been taken into account throughout the research project as it is accepted that arriving at the 'truth' of the event, why the British lost the battle for Mersa el Brega, is the ultimate objective of the work.

Consequently in this regard the starting point of the research, and initially the most significant source of information surrounding the focus of the work came from secondary sources. The many accounts of the Desert War found in the myriad of books written on the war in North Africa formed what might be described as the “Fountain Head” from which the many rivers and streams of more detailed research and analyses trickled and flowed. These, as we shall see, included the reading of primary sources, such as unit war diaries, written correspondence between senior officers, and the thoughts of rank and file soldiers. Moreover, the author managed to find and interview

an eyewitness and took advice from experts on various issues, such as geography and geology.

## UNDERPINNING THE METHOD OF RESEARCH

There are of course many challenges in writing accurate accounts of events in military history. The overall goal of the historian comments Edgar Krentz in *The Historical Critical Method* 'is explanation and understanding, not the passing of judgement on the moral acts of individuals. The historian can evaluate events, institutions, or policies in terms of their effectiveness. He can strike a balance between gain and loss. But he recognises that the task of history is not judgment, but description and explanation'.<sup>10</sup> However, while the rules of historical writing illustrated above may well be the ideal style, approach and method, seldom, it seems, are they completely adhered too.

Indeed, when reviewing the approach, style and methods that various historians have used to arrive at their conclusions, we may see that bias, even when describing the same event or events; can, and often does, influence how authors record events. Bias can have many origins but is often dictated by the author's personal background. William of Malmesbury (c. 1095/96 – c. 1143), was a noted 12<sup>th</sup> century English historian, who C. Warren Hollister considers to be the most talented writer of history since Bede. Hollister was to write that William was 'a gifted historical scholar and an omnivorous reader, impressively well versed in the literature of classical, patristic and earlier medieval times as well as in the writings of his own contemporaries. Indeed William may well have been the most learned man in twelfth-century Western Europe'.<sup>11</sup>

However, even so gifted a writer as William of Malmesbury; was not immune from indulging in biased writing. Antonia Gransden, in her work *Historical Writing in England: c. 500 to c. 1307* noted that: 'In his first period of historical writing, William

---

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (London: SPCK, 1975) p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I, (The English Monarchs Series)* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2001) p. 3.

showed two kinds of bias. First, he had strong prejudice against a number of magnates in the kingdom, both bishops and laymen. Second he had regional bias: he favoured Canterbury in the controversy between the metropolitans of Canterbury and York, and he favoured Malmesbury abbey and its patron saint, Aldhelm'.<sup>12</sup>

As a further example of where bias may influence an author we may cite Arthur Marwick. Marwick uses as his example of biased writing the case of an ambassador who reporting on the 'conditions in the country he is stationed may be biased in various directions: if he is Catholic in a Protestant country he may tend to exaggerate the evidence of a Catholic upsurge; he may send home the kind of information he knows his home government wants to hear'.<sup>13</sup>

Thus we may see that William of Malmesbury was prejudiced against various individuals and institutions which consequently influenced his writing. In Marwick's example we may see that the relationship between an ambassador and his home government biased his writing. However, rank, wealth, political status, friendship and many other influences can all prejudice how an author conveys to his reader the information he wishes them to see.

Furthermore, bias is by no means the only divergent path which differing historians might take. Their approach to historical research can also vary with groups of historians using differing methods to reach their conclusions. Some may be called "descriptive historians" this brand of historian will attempt to give an account of the event or situation under consideration in its own unique setting. The other group may be called "theoretical historians"; they try to find in their subject matter a basis for comparison,

---

<sup>12</sup> Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England: c. 500 to c. 1307* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London: Macmillan Press, 1973) p. 137. For further reading on historical writing see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007) and Stefan Berger, *Writing History Theory & Practice* (London: Arnold, 2003).

classification, interpretation, or generalisation.<sup>14</sup> Again this often leads to wildly divergent solutions to the same research problem.

Most historians will at one time or another fall into both camps even if they claim adherence to only one school. Consequently for the impartial researcher doctrinal entrenchment, as outlined above, should be noted and taken into consideration when reviewing the validity of sources. As this form of bias can often further cloud an already murky picture.

Moreover, not only does bias and doctrinal entrenchment influence historical writing as Philip Hepworth writes in *How to Find Out in History*; ‘the writing of history at its highest level is a combination of scientific and artistic genius’.<sup>15</sup> As the supreme example of, “scientific and artistic genius”, Hepworth cites *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which he considers, and perhaps few could argue against his view, was the result of painstaking research and artistic understanding.<sup>16</sup>

For Hepworth, scientific and artistic genius are by no means; the only factors to be considered when assessing historical writing. Hepworth continues with a review of the contribution that Thomas Carlyle’s work, *The French Revolution*, added to the cannon of knowledge on the subject of the French Revolution. ‘Carlyle’s *French Revolution*, [Hepworth writes], may not now be regarded as an adequate treatment of its subject, yet the exhilaration gained by reading it more than compensates for its subjective distortion. It is probable that the whole impression left in the reader’s mind of the great upheaval is emotionally as near to reality as any history can give’.<sup>17</sup>

So we may see that the background from which an author comes, whether this is, for example, from a differing educational standpoint or perhaps from a differential in

---

<sup>14</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Generalization in the Writing of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963) p.v.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Hepworth, *How to Find Out in History* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1966) p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

military rank, will inevitably introduce an element of bias into his work. Likewise the approach which historians take to develop their arguments whether this is descriptive or theoretical will also influence their conclusions. The painstaking research and artistic understanding which an author brings to his project will frequently result in a highly definitive and accurate account of the subject. The classic example being *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, but even such an undisputed excellent work may not convey the essence of the time to the reader as does, for example, Carlyle's work, *The French Revolution*. However, for Gottschalk, this diversity of styles is no bad trait; for: 'To represent historical episodes with a uniform dullness is thus, at least in part, to misrepresent them. In fact, the historian who writes uninterestingly is to that extent a bad historian'.<sup>18</sup>

## EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH

We may now turn to the approach, style and methods used by various historical researchers to reach their conclusions. The noted war historian Richard Holmes tended to write about the experiences of ordinary soldiers, how they felt and the experiences they had in whatever war they were fighting in. This approach allowed him to build up for the reader an accurate picture of daily life for the individual soldier.

Conversely, and perhaps paradoxically, although Holmes interview veterans frequently he was very reluctant to rely on their evidence, especially evidence given on events which had occurred many years in the past, to support what we might term the bigger picture. Holmes felt that contemporary accounts, such as war diaries, veteran's records and archival material were more reliable. As Martin Childs recalled in the article he wrote on Holmes after his death. Holmes; 'tended to avoid drawing on the reminiscences of veterans, mindful of the frailties of human recall: he had found that first-hand reminiscences differed widely, only 10 years after the event, from those

---

<sup>18</sup> Gottschalk, p 13.

written down at or near the time: 'The closer we get to events, the better our chance of finding out how people really felt.'<sup>19</sup>

The methods referred to above, as used in Holmes work *Tommy*, in which he describes events in the First World War, undoubtedly give a clear and concise view of the conflict. That being said, Holmes' approach, while perhaps suitable for describing events which have taken place in a wide ranging and huge conflict is not suitable in all cases. When describing smaller conflicts and indeed small action engagements such as the battle for Brega, his approach is, this author argues, less suitable.

After the battle for Brega no even partial first hand British accounts seem to have been written. Nor, it seems, over the years have any been sort out. Indeed, until the author of this work interviewed David Hurst-Brown, a veteran of the battle, the only published account of any part of the battle came from an account given by a German soldier. Moreover, official contemporary documents, such as the war diary of 9RB, which was the most significant unit at Brega, are sadly missing. The intelligence truck which contained the diarist and the diary of 9RB was blown up at the very start of the battle. Consequently no detailed record of the part they played in the battle survives. Therefore, if the remembered thoughts of Hurst-Brown had not been sort then vital information on issues such as food, water, ammunition and the state of the defensive trenches would have been unavailable. Without this information many of the conclusions asserted in the work would have remained only probabilities not the near certainties they have become.

The above being said, however, Holmes view on the reliability of veteran's testimony does have a degree of validity about it. It seems that any veteran evidence, and indeed any evidence from whichever source it is obtained, must be evaluated with regard to its context and set against other irrefutable facts if it is to be relied upon. As

---

<sup>19</sup> Martin Childs, 'Professor Richard Holmes', *The Independent* 5 May 2011



Arthur Marwick says in *The Nature of History*; ‘To establish authenticity the historian will apply his technical expertise: he will be familiar with the characteristic forms of an early eleventh-century charter, the spirit used, the style of language, and the legal forms; if the character in front of him departs from these he will on *internal* evidence suspect its authenticity’.<sup>20</sup>

As an example of the historian’s *internal* recognition, in regard to this work, we may look to one aspect of the evidence presented to the author by David Hurst-Brown. In the course of the authors interview with Hurst-Brown he asserted that his battalion, 9RB, had taken over trenches which had been prepared and occupied previously by New Zealand troops. This assumption is completely contradicted by the known facts. At this stage of the war the New Zealand Government would not allow individual battalions to be detached from the main divisional body. Moreover, all the New Zealand battalions were at this time back in Cairo being prepared to go to Greece. His unit actually took over from an Australian battalion.

However, this mistake, in this case, does not devalue the rest of Hurst-Brown’s contribution on issues such as food, water and the positions from which he and his men fought. Even today for most British people it is difficult to distinguish between an Australian accent and a New Zealand accent. For a nineteen year old English man from a rural background in 1941 the distinction must have been far more difficult to make.

Nevertheless, while there might be scope for error in regard to accent there would be less likelihood of error in regard to food, water and where you fought. While Hurst-Brown may have understandably confused Australian from New Zealander he would have been unlikely to mistake whether he had food, water or a good place from which to fight. Indeed when pressed on the issues of food he had vivid memories recalling how the bread they were issued with each day was freshly baked and when spread with

---

<sup>20</sup> Marwick, p. 137.

strawberry jam was delicious. As with most soldiers had he not been fed and watered properly, for water read tea, without which no British soldier will perform at his best, or had considered his fighting position to be sub standard he would have remembered these hardships clearly. Moreover, like most soldiers who have suffered hardship, he would have been only too willing to share his plight with anyone who would listen.

Holmes indeed confirms this very trait. Veterans, Holmes considered, will often tell the listener what he wants to hear, usually gory or heroic episodes from the engagement, these reminiscences can cloud the issue and are consequently obvious pitfalls for the historian. Holmes felt that veterans when being interviewed ‘sometimes played their roles too well: they became Veterans, General Issue, neatly packaged with what we wanted to hear, exploding at the touch of the tape recorder button or the snap of a TV documentarist’s clapper-board. Up to my neck in muck and bullets; rats as big as footballs; the sergeant major was a right bastard; all my mates were killed’.<sup>21</sup>

The above being said Holmes strikes a very relevant chord to this work when he gives his opinion on certain aspects of military research. Holmes considers that the approach taken by some authors is, in his words, ‘simply not serious or scholarly’. Talking of work written about WWI in *Tommy*, Holmes felt that too many early authors had bent ‘its events to fit their own analytical framework, jamming their pastry-cutters onto the evidence, and either discarding anything that lay outside their intriguing shape, or rolling it extra thin if there was not quite enough’.<sup>22</sup> This trait of perhaps not giving accurate and unbiased accounts of both events and the actions of certain personalities will become a recurring theme in this work. Perpetrated it has to be said by most authors who have written about the early desert war.

---

<sup>21</sup> Richard Holmes, *Tommy* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) p. xxiii

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. xxii

## SECONDARY SOURCES

As, perhaps, with many retrospective research projects, an initial inclination to research the events surrounding the battle of Brega was sparked by reading secondary sources. In many of these works there were found many contradictions, anomalies and often a general lack of detailed information about the subject. Many authors, Correlli Barnett<sup>23</sup>, Alexander Clifford<sup>24</sup>, Robert Woollcombe<sup>25</sup> and Basil Liddell Hart<sup>26</sup>, to mention only four, have to a greater, or often lesser, extent, referenced the events surrounding the battle. Some, it has to be conceded, have even made reference to the battle itself. However, in virtually all the sources referenced some degree of ambiguity can be found. In an effort, therefore, to establish the veracity of the various assertions, claims, counterclaims and conclusions offered in the many sources referenced the initial research methods employed were to extend the search and read even more widely.

Investigations were undertaken to establish the extent and availability of written sources which referenced the battle, associated events and the personalities involved. Investigations in this direction soon revealed that there was a considerable body of written material available. However, while these new sources provided some answers they again failed to give a satisfactory account of how and why the British lost the battle of Brega. Indeed, there were in practically all the many accounts referenced even more contradictions relating to why and how events unfolded as they did at Brega.

So in an effort to establish which assertions made by those who had contributed references to the battle were plausible and which needed clarification a comprehensive list of the points upon which the authors agreed and the areas of ambiguity was compiled. Careful examination of their works suggested many areas of partial

---

<sup>23</sup> Barnett

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Clifford, *Three Against Rommel* (London: Harrap & Co, 1943)

<sup>25</sup> Woollcombe

<sup>26</sup> Basil Liddell-Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London: Book Club Associates, 1973)

agreement. However, it must be pointed out that there were, in several instances, sharp diversions of opinion.

## **ASSEMBLING SOURCES**

From the broad river of information found in the secondary sources relating to the battle of Brega many significant and intriguing waterways of research offered themselves up for exploration. Topic areas of interest included the personalities involved, command and command structures. Also of interest were the geography and geology of the region, unit availability, significant political and military events, intelligence and many other related factors.

In an effort to clarify these aspects of the research it was obvious that primary sources would need to be accessed. The identification of politicians, senior commanders and rank and file soldiers involved in the events leading up to the Brega battle, indicated that memoirs, biographies and auto-biographies would need to be referenced. It was also recognised that any eyewitness accounts would be very useful and considerable effort was expended to track one down.

From initial reading it soon became clear that the geography and geology of the region was critical to the battle's outcome. Therefore, detailed investigations would need to be undertaken into the topography of the region; and the wider geographical context into which Brega fitted. These investigations required, in a macro sense, the detailed study of maps. From detailed study of the maps calculations could be made on how time and distance effected military operations. Further scrutiny of air, sea and land routes, analyses of varying weather conditions and a detailed understanding of the regions diverse terrain gave a more detailed understanding of the Brega position. To compliment this research a geological, geographical and topographical survey of the entire Brega position was required to establish why; or indeed if, Brega had any military

importance. To satisfy this requirement the assistance of various experts was sort and the detailed study of numerous geography/geology reference books undertaken.

From a basic understanding of the chronology of the historical and political events leading up to the battle at Brega, it was realised that a more detailed study of how such events, might or might not, have influenced the battle was necessary. This work involved even wider reading and encompassed research into personalities and events stretching from 1941 all the way back in time to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. To facilitate this aspect of the research it was necessary to scrutinising memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, personal correspondence and official communications. Indeed, to find definitive answers on a whole range of issues the archives of several document repositories were investigated. As the work progressed data from many public organisations, institutions, museums, universities and libraries was sort. Prominent among the institutions accessed were the Imperial War Museum, the Public Records Office at Kew, and the Liddell-Hart Centre London.

The analyses of the available intelligence proved to be a complex element of the research. Consequently great pains were taken to establish what the senior politicians and commanders knew of enemy intentions prior to the battle of Brega. Research was carried out looking at intelligence gathered in both London and Cairo. The scant intelligence gathered in London and sent to Cairo formed one strand of research. While the multifarious intelligence gathered in theatre; and disseminated in Cairo formed a second, and more compelling, view of enemy intentions. Indeed prior to the outbreak of war so many intelligence summaries were being circulated to over 60 addresses that Middle East Command was forced to set up in Cairo its own Middle East Intelligence Centre (MEIC).<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1993) p. 66.

However, even with all this information no investigation into the outcome of a battle would be complete without a detailed examination of the men who fought in it, the units they belonged to and the various weapons they used. To satisfy the requirements of these three objectives a multi faceted approach was instigated. Detailed investigation of the main personalities involved was carried out using the records held in several institutions. Journals, magazines, newspapers and the internet were also extremely helpful in this regard.

Several journal articles helped with background information on significant personalities involved, units and the weapons used in the desert campaigns. The article by Trevor J. Constable in *The Journal of Historical Review*,<sup>28</sup> for example, on General Percy Hobart, proved to be very helpful. To establish the whereabouts and fighting ability of unit's regimental histories of all the major participating troops were obtained and scrutinised. Unit war diaries were drawn from the Public Records Office and thoroughly investigated. With regard to the weapons used extensive research was carried out using both technical manuals and data sources.

Which brings us to the battle its self; no investigation would be satisfactory, even if all the details mentioned above were known, without a detailed understanding of how the battle unfolded. The details of how the battle was fought, it has to be said, presented numerous problems. Not least of the problems being the absence of the war diary of the leading battalion involved, which, as mentioned, was destroyed in the battle. Nevertheless, even with this gap in the research, compensatory methods proved satisfactory. The war diaries of all the other units engaged in the battle on the day were carefully referenced. Unit histories were trawled for information and the observations from any eye witness accounts were included.

---

<sup>28</sup> Trevor J. Constable, 'The Little-Known Story of Percy Hobart, They Called Him 'Hobo'', *The Journal of Historical Review*, January/February 1999 Issue, Volume 18, number 1.

Indeed, where any verifiable information was found of events which took place on the day it was utilised. Several, partial, enemy accounts of the battle were discovered and these proved to be very useful. However, one of the most informative sources of information on what actually happen at Mersa el Brega on 31 March, as mentioned earlier, came from Lieutenant David Hurst-Brown. Brown's testimony, a soldier who actually fought in the battle, was gained by the author during the course of a long, and very fruitful, interview.

### **ACCESSING SOURCES: ARCHIVAL RESEARCH**

While disseminating accurate information from published sources has its problems, such as bias and doctrinal entrenchment, gaining information from archives also has its share of problems. Indeed archives often have these pitfalls and also practical challenges to be overcome before useful information can be gathered. At the very basic level archives are more difficult to access than say books which are available almost everywhere. Unlike books which can be bought, loaned or accessed on line there are relatively few archives. However, the benefits of using archives for advanced research cannot be overstated. As Michael R. Hill says in his work *Archival Strategies and Techniques*; 'Social scientists who use archives enter a new world of information. These repositories challenge and extend the usual methods of finding and collecting data. The special interests and needs of the social scientist require an introduction to archives that specifically encourages our collective sociological imagination'.<sup>29</sup>

However, the above being said, once at the archives problems of accessing the information stored within them can frequently present researchers with problems. Many of the documents stored in archives, such as war diaries, are written in long hand which is often very difficult to read. Moreover, much of what is written is frequently abbreviated and quite often peppered with shorthand references to people, places and

---

<sup>29</sup> Michael R. Hill, *Archival Strategies and Techniques* (London: Sage Publications, 1993) p. 1.

equipment which have long gone out of common usage. To those reading these reports at the time the script would no doubt have been perfectly understandable but to modern day researchers it is very difficult to decipher.

Consequently in order to gain the full meaning of what has been written time and patience needs to be devoted to learning how to read the documents. Only once this skill has been learnt can the researcher hope to successfully decipher the abbreviations and oblique references. Also many of the most important and interesting incidents referenced in war diaries, accounts of battles for example, were written under extremely difficult circumstances. Consequently with the diarist under pressure simple mistakes can often appear such as timing of events, direction of travel and even the day on which the action took place. Therefore, wherever possible, even first hand accounts need to be carefully checked against other references.

Moreover, attaining, reading and deciphering individual archival documents by no means answers all the questions a researcher might have. Within most documents, especially war diaries, there will often be references to other units or other positions. Sadly these references will frequently be incomplete. They may give tantalising clues to some other nugget of information, which might be found in another document, but they obviously do not tell the researcher exactly where it might be found. In such cases many more documents, not necessarily even in the same archive, might need to be searched before the grain of information sought can be found.

In other respects archives can be very disappointing in what they can and cannot supply. By no means all the documents that a researcher might desire will exist. Gaps in the available material are frequent. In the case of this work the obvious omission is the war diary of 9RB.

Other material which might be deemed useful, although it exists, might not be available to researchers. This is certainly the case with the Wavell family archive.



Although many of Wavell's private papers are known to be in existence, held by his family, these have not been placed in the public domain. Indeed at the time of writing as far as is known only one researcher, Victoria Schofield, has, in recent times, been granted limited access to the collection. It is rumoured that a family member intends to write a biography of his relation and perhaps understandably wants to keep the details of the collection private until this work is undertaken.

However, in regard to this work the absences of the Wavell private papers are considered to be of relatively little importance. Most if not all of the correspondence between Wavell and his senior commanders, which relates to the events described in this work, is already in the public domain. Even the letters he sent after the war to people like O'Connor, which he often asked not to be made public, were, when the recipient died, lodged in archives. The O'Connor papers, for example, are lodged at the Liddell-Hart Centre. Also all the official cables, telegram's and letters between government officials and Wavell, in the period being referenced, are in the public domain. Moreover, and it is perhaps worth noting, Wavell released some documents himself to back up his interpretation of certain events.

Furthermore, several very extensive collections of private letters, diaries and papers are now available to researchers. The correspondence, for example, between General Dill, who was Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Wavell during the war, which is stored at the National Archives, is extensive and very revealing. The Eden papers which are kept at Birmingham University are also very helpful when researching the relationship between the political and military hierarchy in this period. In regard to this work they were very helpful in revealing the complex relationship between Dill, Churchill and Wavell.

The diaries and papers of Sir Philip Mitchell, who in 1940/41 was the British Chief Political Officer in East Africa, which are housed at the Rhodes House Library, Oxford

University, give a fascinating perspective on how a serving diplomat viewed the way in which the war in East Africa was being waged. Furthermore, the edited diaries of several important military and political figures; that held significant positions of power and influence at the time, are now available. These are very useful to cross reference many of the issues mentioned in the archive material. The diaries of Sir Alan Brooke, edited by Arthur Bryant,<sup>30</sup> and Sir Henry Pownall, edited by Brian Bond,<sup>31</sup> for example, give first hand and almost immediate reactions to virtually all the major events in the war.

## **COMMAND AND COMMANDERS IN CONTEXT**

As command, command decisions and command structures play such a prominent part in this thesis it has been considered necessary to devote a whole section to the subject of command. Moreover, in the main body of the work several crucial, individual, command decisions will be scrutinised in considerable detail. Methodologically the approach adopted to inform the reader on the complex issue of military command has been to place in context each of the senior commanders involved in the defence of Brega.

Consequently this element of the research will commence with an in depth review of Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command, General Archibald Wavell. Wavell, as theatre commander, had overall responsibility for all actions taken in his command area. As with any military structure Wavell's command was not administered by the C-in-C alone. Consequently the actions and responsibilities of several of Wavell's subordinate commanders will also be scrutinised. These will include his de facto second in command General Maitland Wilson. Wilson, among his other tasks, was mostly responsible for building the vitally important base installations in the Middle East.

---

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide* (London: Reprint Society, 1958)

<sup>31</sup> Brian Bond, *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall* Vols I and II (London: Leo Cooper, 1972)

Several Army Commanders will also be reviewed these will include General Richard O'Connor, who was responsible for the first successful desert offensive Operation *Compass*.

In regard to the defence of Brega itself all the senior commanders, and their actions prior to, and during, the battle, will be reviewed. For reference these will include in hierarchical order of command General Philip Neame VC, C-in-C Cyrenaica Command and General M. Gambier-Parry, C-in-C 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division. Moreover, for completeness the two Brigade commanders, Brigadier Gordon Rimington, commander of 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Brigade, and Brigadier H. B. Latham, commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> Support Group, will also be referenced.

## **REFERENCE TO THE LITERATURE ON COMMAND**

It would be fair to say that the literature referencing command and the various roles and functions that commanders undertake has been explored in some detail. In this regard works by authors such as T. N. Dupuy, Sun-Tzu, Elliot Cohen and Carl von Clausewitz proved to be particularly useful. References from these authors, and the many others studied, will it is hoped build up for the reader a comprehensive overview of how command and successful commanders, working under the military and political systems prevailing in their era, achieved their success. While on the other hand demonstrating to the reader how and why military commanders, working within the same military and political constraints, sometimes fail.

So what is the role of the military commander in the modern era? For Dupuy the study of the Clausewitzian theory of command reveals the complexity and importance of leadership. 'Clausewitz's thinking about the obvious scalar or dimensional nature of a theory of combat, and the hopelessness of quantifying some aspects of war – and particularly the vagaries of human nature – was his recognition of the overwhelming

importance of leadership'. Elliot Cohen, in *Military Misfortunes*, tells us that; 'the modern commander is much more akin to the managing director of a large conglomerate enterprise than ever he is to the warrior chief of old. He has become the head of a complex military organization, whose many branches he must oversee and on whose cooperation, assistance, and support he depends for his successes.'<sup>32</sup> The military commander therefore, as we shall see in more detail in the main work, must be more an organiser than a fighter. He must coordinate the activities of a multitude of branches within his command structure. He should seek, and hopefully gain, the assistance of others, and his job will be made infinitely easier if he gains support from those above and below him.

Sun-Tzu, on the other hand, as highlighted by Ralph B. Sawyer in his work on the *Art of War*, 'frequently discusses the essential problem of command: forging a clearly defined organisation in control of thoroughly disciplined, well-ordered troops'.<sup>33</sup> This view of command is particularly pertinent to this work, for as we will see in later chapters, some of the command practises mentioned above, particularly well ordered troops, were clearly absent from the British forces defending Brega.

However and again we shall explore this aspect of command more thoroughly in the main work, personality traits and institutional influences can, and often do, shape the military commander. As Cohen again writes:

The people who get to the top do so because they possess certain institutionally desirable characteristics: They are cautious, they adhere to rules and regulations, they respect and accept authority, they obey their superiors, and they regard discipline and submission to authority as the highest virtues. Twenty five or thirty years spent gaining promotion simply accentuates these characteristics, so that by the time a soldier reaches the top of the tree he lacks the very qualities of flexibility, imaginativeness, and adventurousness he needs to exercise command effectively.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Elliot Cohen, *Military Misfortunes* (New York: Free Press, 2006) p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ralph B. Sawyer, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (New York: Metro Books, 1994) p. 142.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, *Military Misfortunes*, pp. 8/9.

This assessment of how senior commanders might develop should also be kept in mind when we reach the main work. It shows a remarkable degree of similarity to several of the military commanders, primarily Wavell, whose command decisions, the thesis will argue, played such a prominent part in the defeat at Brega.

Lastly we may look at the commanders' relationship with his political master. A relationship which; in regard to this work, was primarily between Churchill in London and Wavell in Cairo. Unfortunately, as we shall see in the main work, this was not to be a particularly harmonious or indeed productive relationship. Nonetheless, strained relations between political leaders at home and commanders in the field are not an uncommon situation in times of war and they do not, in themselves history suggests, preclude commanders from winning victories.

While each group has the same overriding objective, which is defeating the enemy; their perspectives and methods for achieving this goal are often divergent. Politicians in order to satisfy public opinion may well want results faster than the commander on the ground thinks he can deliver them. This divergence of views, which becomes more pressing for the politician as the need for a victory for politician reasons becomes more important, inevitably results in tension. Indeed, the culture in which each operated, perhaps inevitably, resulted in friction. As Cohen suggests in *Supreme Command*: 'The give and take between politicians and their generals exacts a real price, and by and large that price fell on the shoulders of the generals, who found themselves broken down by the strain of managing a war while in turn being managed by a civilian leader who treated military advice as just that – advice, not a course of action to be ratified with no more than formal consideration'.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Elliot Cohen, *Supreme Command* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002) p. 209.

In the Middle East the tension between the political leadership in London and the military leadership in Cairo stemmed from their differing perspectives as again Cohen points out:

The Prime Minister [Churchill] was preoccupied with the sacrifices made to sustain the armed forces in the Middle East, including the dispatch of convoys sent at great risk through the Mediterranean; the local commanders [Wavell] saw chiefly the difficulties in assimilating the new equipment into their forces. Local commanders saw chiefly the operational task before them, and pleaded for time. Churchill, an avid consumer of intelligence, particularly decrypts of Rommel's communications, knew just how badly off the *Afrika Korps* was (or claimed to be), which made his irritation at the failure of his commanders to crush the Germans all the more intense and in retrospect, understandable.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, this tension can be greatly enhanced when politicians, who are often many miles away from the action, have to rely on information given to them by their field commanders. Politicians rely on accurate reports from their field commanders to make wider strategic decisions. If they are given inaccurate or even false information then this can lead to inappropriate decisions being made. This tendency to make inappropriate decisions was certainly the case with regard to decisions Churchill made on information he received from Wavell. Information Churchill received from Wavell persuade him to order Wavell to undertake operations, and to not undertake operations, which with more accurate information may well have led to completely different instructions being issued. We will see several examples of where had Churchill and the War Cabinet been given all the facts and true estimates they would almost certainly have issued different instructions to Wavell. In this regard we may keep in mind the highly possible advance on Tripoli and the highly dangerous intervention in Greece. Had Churchill been given all the relevant information on these two operations he may well have embarked on a totally different courses of action.

---

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, pp. 128/129.

Indeed, in this regard, perhaps, the ideal relationship between commander and politician is not that the politician should expect from his commander total obedience. He should, perhaps, expect dialogue and commanders that will not hesitate to argue with their political masters if they feel they have valid reasons for the objection. ‘What occurred between president or prime minister and general was an unequal dialogue – a dialogue, in that both sides expressed their views bluntly, indeed offensively, and not once but repeatedly. Far from the simplistic conventions of the “normal” theory of civil-military relations – which seems to reserve dialogue for only the beginning and end of a war – the practise of these men was interaction throughout the conflict’.<sup>37</sup>

This dialogue, when missing, as was certainly the case between Wavell and Churchill, inevitably leads to tension and misunderstanding. Consequently, as Cohen points out; ‘British soldiers like Field Marshals Sir John Dill and Archibald Wavell were prime cases of intelligent, well schooled, and able men who simply could not get along with a prime minister who had greater respect for another sort of men with more evident brilliance and less stolid reserve’.<sup>38</sup>

The above, therefore, establishes, in broad outline, how this research a topic has been undertaken. Explaining, as it does, how the various research sources, such as, secondary, primary and archival references, have been used. Moreover, it establishes the need to thoroughly understand certain specific aspects of the topic being researched, for example in the case of this work, understanding the need to be familiar with the intricacies of command and command structures. However, it is also felt necessary to understand the methods used to explain to the reader how and why practical aspects of the research were addressed.

---

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p. 209.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

## CONTRADICTIONS: TERRAIN AND UNIT AVAILABILITY

As mentioned earlier many contradictions and anomalies were found in both the primary and secondary sources. Issues, such as the suitability of the terrain to sustain a defensive location, were brought into question. Also the availability of units to man positions should it be established that Brega was suitable for defence needed careful evaluation. Many authors who referenced the battle felt that the terrain around Brega had outstanding defensive qualities and could be made into a very strong defensive position. Rowan-Robinson in *Wavell in the Middle East* felt that the British positions around El Agheila/Brega were 'regarded as particularly strong. The single approach to it from Tripoli was flanked on one side by the sea and on the other by semi-desert and, therefore, appeared easily defensible'.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, there were other authors who put forward contradictory views about the suitability of the terrain around Brega being good for defence. Brian Cull, for example, considered that 'Rommel's rapid advance revealed the vulnerability of Mersa el Brega'.<sup>40</sup>

Most authors agreed that the defenders of Brega were few in number, perhaps no more than fifteen hundred men. Moreover, some felt that, given the military circumstance prevailing at the time, this number could not have been significantly increased. Alexander Clifford, for example, had this to say: 'In all Cyrenaica there were now only the Ninth Australian Division and elements of the newly arrived Second Armoured Division from England. Wavell had stretched his resources to provide armies for Greece and Abyssinia, and Cyrenaica had been left almost bare'.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> H. Rowan-Robinson, *Wavell in the Middle East* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1941) p. 190.

<sup>40</sup> Brian Cull, *Hurricanes Over Tobruk* (London: Grub Street, 1999) p. 83.

<sup>41</sup> Clifford, p. 83.



However, evidence gained from several sources suggested that despite these commitments Wavell still had many unused military assets laying idle in the Delta.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, aside from the substantial military assets already in the Middle East new units were arriving in a steady stream from several locations. Indeed, in this regard a complete infantry division, 50 Division, left the UK for the Middle East in May 1941.<sup>43</sup> These facts therefore indicated that at the very least limited reinforcements could quite easily have been found to improve the defences at Brega without seriously jeopardising other parts of the command.

Issues such as those mentioned above and other disputed points established a platform from which research could be undertaken to validate each individual claim. There were of course many issues to be resolved. However, the techniques used to verify the two points mentioned above, will it is hoped, serve to illustrate the diverse methods employed to validate the various claims.

With regard to establishing how suitable the terrain around Brega was for defence the initial research focused on any information found in written accounts. These included primary and secondary sources, unit histories, war diaries and such maps as were available. In regard to the amount of useful maps readily available this was at first disappointing. Notwithstanding this problem, two maps, one virtually contemporary and one more modern, were quite quickly discovered.<sup>44</sup> Later as the research progressed more detailed maps began to be discovered in the many unit diaries accessed.<sup>45</sup> Both the modern and more contemporary maps, when closely examined, revealed many

---

<sup>42</sup> G. L. Verney, *The Desert Rats* (London: Green Hill Books, 1990) p. 50. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division was at the time of the German offensive uncommitted. 'the armoured and motorised troops who had had several years' experience in the Desert and nearly a year's fighting there, were now back in Egypt'.

<sup>43</sup> P. J. Lewis & I. R. English, *Into Battle with the Durhams* (London: The London Stamp Exchange, 1990) p. 40.

<sup>44</sup> Defence Mapping Agency Map of Libya Series TCP Sheet H-4A Edition 3 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Detailed maps War Diary of 7 RTR Found at PRO WO 169/1416 Also War Diary B/O Battery 1 RHA WO 169/1436

important features of the Brega position. Information on features such as the other significant villages in the area, for example, El Agheila and Agedabia, was gained.

Also information was gained on the only tarmac road in the area, the Via Balbia, and many of the significant tracks in the region. Aside from giving information on the settlements, road and tracks in the area the maps were also useful in identifying many of the natural features in the region of Brega. These included the Wadi el Faregh, the salt marshes and the Bir el Suera sand sea which, as we shall see later, had a significant influence on the battle.

Notwithstanding the above, while the maps indicated where these natural and manmade geographical features appeared on the desert floor they could only give a partial appreciation of how significant such features might be in a defensive situation. In order to understand their significance in relation to the defence of the Brega defile extensive research had to be carried out. From secondary sources, such as *The Crucible of War*<sup>46</sup>, *Rommel's Desert War*<sup>47</sup> and *The Trail of the Fox*<sup>48</sup> useful indications could be gleaned in regard to various aspects of the position and the surrounding terrain. In *The Trail of the Fox* a description of the village of Brega is found giving its position as near the coast and straddling sand hills. From an account of the Brega position in *Rommel's Desert War* we learn that to the north of the village there were extensive sand dunes. These aspects of the position are confirmed in *The Crucible of War* and we gain further information indicating that the ground around the village was suitable as a forming up area. This information indicated that it was good solid ground as apposed to soft desert.

While the maps and written sources gave a clear picture of the layout of the terrain in and around Brega they failed to give detailed information on what conditions were like at the time of the battle. Information on conditions contemporary with the events was

---

<sup>46</sup> Barrie Pitt, *The Crucible of War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980) p. 254.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox* (London: Papermac, 1985) p. 69.

lacking as were details on the significance of the various geographical features identified. For example, although they had provided a detailed geographical map of the area, and an understanding of the significant natural and manmade features, this information gave little indication of what each feature could contribute to the defence. Nor, indeed, how they could be made to interact together to form a defensive barrier. To acquire this information a two pronged approach was utilised. Firstly primary and secondary sources were sought out which contained accounts of the terrain from people who had been in or around the Brega position at the time. Secondly experts in geological terrain were contacted with a view to establishing what affect the various geographical features, such as salt marshes, would have had on the fighting.<sup>49</sup>

In regard to understanding the debilitating effect the sand and the sand seas had on men and vehicles H. W. Schmidt's book *With Rommel in the Desert*<sup>50</sup> gave valuable information. Schmidt gives a detailed account of the problems he encountered when he undertook a mission which required him to leave the tarmac road and strike out into the open desert.<sup>51</sup> He supplied detailed information on how difficult traversing desert sand was and how he avoided, because of the difficulty he found in crossing them, the many sand seas he came across. This information confirmed that travel in the open desert was both difficult and time consuming. Even without the added problem of enemy troops being dug into defensive positions and impeding his progression with gunfire Schmidt found it almost impossible to make his way through the sand dunes. Indeed he concluded that traversing the sand seas was almost impossible.

While books such as Schmidt's gave a first hand account of the effect sand could have on vehicles and men unit histories proved invaluable in describing the actual

---

<sup>49</sup> Mike Windel and Stuart Swann of the Yorkshire Geology Trust Based in Robin Hoods Bay North Yorkshire 5 Station Workshops Station Road.

<sup>50</sup> H. W. Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert* (London: Harrap & Co, 1951) pp. 21/26

<sup>51</sup> William F. Buckingham, *Tobruk: The Great Siege 1941-2* (Stroud: Tempus, 2008) p. 25. The Via Balbia was a 935 mile long tarmac road which ran along the full length of the Libyan coast from Egypt to Tunisia. It was opened by Mussolini in 1937.

layout of the British positions in the Brega defensive line. C. N. Barclay<sup>52</sup> in his book *The History of the Northumberland Fusiliers 1919-1945* gives a detailed account of where the fusiliers took up their defensive positions and details several significant features which played an important part in the battle. Barclay gives us a detailed description of the positions the fusiliers occupied prior to the battle and places the only significant high ground in the area, Cemetery Hill, into its geographical location. These first hand accounts of the terrain and the dispositions of the various combatants helped to build up a comprehensive overview of where each detachment of the defence was situated. It also helped to place them on or near the various significant geographical features found in the vicinity.

However, while the significance of geographical features such as the high ground of Cemetery Hill are self explanatory, that is, for example, giving better visibility to artillery spotters, and the difficulty of traversing cloying sand dunes is understandable, the importance of other features was less obvious. In this regard the significance of sand seas and salt marshes was more problematical. Many sources, Schmidt for example, indicated that sand seas were almost impossible to cross. Others, such as Pitt,<sup>53</sup> had indicated that salt marshes made the Brega position to quote Rommel 'difficult either to assault or outflank' but in none of these sources was a clear explanation of why these geographical features should be so difficult to traverse.

In an effort therefore to understand the significance of these geographical features experts were consulted. For information on both salt marshes and sand seas the director of the North East Yorkshire Geology Trust,<sup>54</sup> Mike Windle, and geologist Stuart Swann, gave detailed information on the consistency and nature of these features. They

---

<sup>52</sup> C. N. Barclay, *The History of the Northumberland Fusiliers 1919-1945* (London: William Clowes, 1952) p. 54.

<sup>53</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 254.

<sup>54</sup> Windle & Swann, North East Geology Trust.

also, very helpfully, provided reading material giving detailed knowledge on how these natural features function<sup>55</sup>.

## UNIT DEPLOYMENT AND CAPABILITY

From the above sources it was eventually possible to construct a detailed plan of the whole Brega position from a geographical and topographical perspective. However, for a detailed understanding of the status of units actually deployed to Brega, and any potential units which might have been deployed to the area, other research methods proved to be needed. From the many primary and secondary sources accessed, Neame,<sup>56</sup> Connell,<sup>57</sup> Strawson<sup>58</sup> and Raugh,<sup>59</sup> for example, a detailed list of units either already in Middle East Command or coming to it, was established. Armed with this list it was possible to embark on a regime of research with the objective of establishing the availability, whereabouts and fighting potential of over twenty units.

Unit histories proved to be a valuable source of information with regard to where units were at specific times and their states of readiness for combat. Also extremely useful in this respect were the letters and correspondence of officers and men found in several repositories. Further useful information was found in several magazine articles. Purnell's *History of the Second World*<sup>60</sup> proved to be very useful and gave many detailed accounts of desert conditions, equipment and some informative maps. However, in most cases it was the detailed information found in the unit war diaries, stored at the Public Records Office in Kew, which allowed the picture to be made complete. Unit war diaries gave detailed information on the day to day movement of the

---

<sup>55</sup> P Kearey, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Geology* (London: Penguin Reference, 2001) p. 232. Definition of sand sea known as Sebcha [also spelt Sabkha or Sebkha] 'broad plain or salt flat in an arid or semi-arid region containing evaporites at a level dependent on the local water table'.

<sup>56</sup> Philip Neame, *Playing With Strife* (London: Harap, 1947)

<sup>57</sup> John Connell, *Wavell Scholar and Soldier* (London: Collins, 1964)

<sup>58</sup> John Strawson, *The Battle for North Africa* (B. T. Batsford, London: 1969)

<sup>59</sup> Raugh

<sup>60</sup> Purnell's *'History of the Second World War'* (London: Purnell Publishing, 1967)

troops. They also gave additional information on such things as unit casualties, commanding officers, issue of new weapons and the arrival of reinforcements.

With such information it was possible to then research the fighting capability of each unit referenced. As an example of how sources such as those mentioned above enhanced the accuracy of the thesis we may look at the research carried out on the 7<sup>th</sup> Medium Artillery Regiment (7MAR).

Shelford Bidwell, in his book *Gunners at War*<sup>61</sup> gives a good insight into where this unit was prior to the Brega battle and where it was later in April. He supplied information on their equipment, the types of guns they had and the vehicles they used to transport them. The unit war diary<sup>62</sup> gives the names of their senior officers the exact numbers of men available and revealed exactly where they were at crucial dates significant to the battle of Brega.

This information enabled research to be carried out on the capabilities of their weapons. This allowed information to be gathered on such issues as rates of fire, weight of shot, and range.<sup>63</sup> Further investigation revealed the types and capabilities of their artillery tractors.<sup>64</sup> This knowledge allowed research to be undertaken to establish how far these vehicles could travel, how fast they could travel and how many spare rounds of ammunition each vehicle normally carried.

Moreover, to back up the information found in biographical, archival and technical sources, wherever possible, personal correspondence was also sort. In this regard the letters and personal diaries of veterans held in repositories such as the Imperial War Museum and the Liddell-Hart Centre were also accessed. These records proved to be very useful in revealing, among other things, how senior commanders and rank and file

---

<sup>61</sup> Shelford Bidwell, *Gunners at War* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1970)

<sup>62</sup> War Diary of 7<sup>th</sup> Medium Artillery Regiment WO 169/1491

<sup>63</sup> Chris Bishop, *The Encyclopaedia of Weapons of WWII* (London: Amber books, 2007)

<sup>64</sup> John Church, *Military Vehicles of World War 2* (New York: Crescent Books, 1982)

soldiers viewed the capabilities of those around them, the conditions under which they fought and the quality and effectiveness of the weapons they used.

## CONCLUSION

Thus the reader may be confident that the research methods employed to compile this project were both rigorous and comprehensive. References found in, for example, secondary sources and journals have in all cases been verified by primary sources. Unit histories and war diaries have been thoroughly consulted and cross referenced to establish the veracity of claims made in secondary sources and primary sources.

Where possible the thoughts of both senior commanders and ordinary soldiers have been consulted to give extra reassurance that the information quoted is accurate. To compliment these sources expert advice has been sought such as in the case of establishing the relevance of the geological condition of the ground around Brega. In all cases the quality and ability of the weapons and vehicles used in the campaign have been researched in great depth. In conclusion the reader may be reassured that the conclusions reached in this thesis have been arrived at by the use of a number of complimentary and well established historical methods.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*The root of bad writing is to compose what you have not worked out for yourself. Unless words come into the writers mind as fresh coinage for what the writer himself knows, knows to be true, it is impossible for him to give back in words that direct quality of experience, which is the essence of literature.*<sup>65</sup> Alfred Kazin (1915-1998) U.S. Literary critic

This literature review will seek to convey to the reader the depth and breadth of the sources used to conduct this research thesis into the battle of Mersa el Brega. The review will commence with an in depth study of how four writers have described the

---

<sup>65</sup> Dr Laurence J. Peter, *Peter's Quotations* (New York: Quill, 1992) Alfred Kazin, (1915-1998) U.S. literary critic, p. 511.

events surrounding the battle of Mersa el Brega and the consequent loss of Cyrenaica.

The purpose of this element of the review will be to seek to discover what various authors have contributed to the debate. The four historians whose works have been chosen for analyses are, Henry Rowan-Robinson,<sup>66</sup> Correlli Barnett,<sup>67</sup> John Connell<sup>68</sup> and Basil Liddell Hart.<sup>69</sup>

These authors are by no means the only writers who have referenced this subject, they are, however, included here as their writings and conclusions are typical in many respects of authors such as Victoria Schofield,<sup>70</sup> John Strawson,<sup>71</sup> David Fraser,<sup>72</sup> Ronald Lewin<sup>73</sup> and Harold E. Raugh<sup>74</sup> who have also referenced the events surrounding the battle of Brega. They will therefore hopefully serve to give the reader a broad understanding of how writers have, in the main, covered this subject.

The views, conclusions and assertions contributed by authors and historians, such as those mentioned above, frequently, and perhaps inevitably, define and shape how historical events, such as those reviewed in this work, come to be understood by those who read them. It follows, therefore, that if authors give an event perfunctory treatment, assigning to the event little or no importance, others will inevitably follow.

Furthermore, should these authors consider that on the evidence received the event needs no further investigation their opinion will, almost certainly, become the received wisdom. In relation to the subject matter of this work, the defeat of British forces at Mersa El Brega and the subsequent loss of Cyrenaica, this has undoubtedly become the case.

---

<sup>66</sup> Rowan-Robinson.

<sup>67</sup> Barnett

<sup>68</sup> Connell

<sup>69</sup> Liddell-Hart

<sup>70</sup> Schofield.

<sup>71</sup> Strawson, *The Battle for North Africa*.

<sup>72</sup> David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them* (London: Book Club Associates, 1994).

<sup>73</sup> Lewin

<sup>74</sup> Raugh



All our authors to some degree mention the loss of Cyrenaica and some even reference the battle of Brega itself. However, in their view it seems that the battle and the events surrounding it were so insignificant and the outcome so unavoidable that in-depth research has not been deemed necessary. This lack of accurate and informative research is when one considers how devastating the consequences of defeat at Brega were to British war aims hard to understand. The military gains made in North Africa, in nearly three months of hard fighting, were lost, some might say thrown away, in one day.

Moreover, the defeat at Brega undoubtedly jeopardised Britain's whole military position in the Middle East leaving open as it did the road to Cairo and the oilfields beyond.<sup>75</sup> As Kenneth Macksey writes in his book *Military Errors of World War Two*: 'Wavell's decision to relegate North Africa to a subsidiary role in favour of an entry into the Balkans may be adjudged a strategic error of the first magnitude which had a profound effect upon the future course of the war'.<sup>76</sup>

Nor is the lack of in-depth research of the battle, or the events surrounding the battle, by our authors' the only disservice they have done to this potentially disastrous engagement. Successive writers, be they participants in the battle who subsequently wrote their memoirs or historical chroniclers, have, to a large extent fed off each other's work. They have habitually taken the views and research of their fellow authors as completely accurate, true and defining and repeated their conclusions in their own accounts. However, investigations for this work suggest that their research, conclusions and memories are often at odds with evidence uncovered for this reappraisal of the battle. Their appreciations of the British command structure in the Middle East and the

---

<sup>75</sup> Irving, p. 66. Rommel said 'my first objective will be the re-conquest of Cyrenaica; my second, northern Egypt and the Suez Canal'.

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Macksey, *Military Errors of World War Two* (Poole: Arms & Armour Press, 1987) p. 75.

abilities, or other wise; of the personalities involved in the events leading up to the battle can be particularly misleading.

Of particular note in this regard, and an aspect which the main work will investigate in some detail, are the misleading interpretations of the actions, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say inactions, of the senior British commanders in the Middle East. Their assessment of the actions and abilities of General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief of all troops in North Africa, is of particular interest in this regard. As one of the crucial personalities in the run up to the battle for Brega Wavell's account of what he knew about his enemies intentions and what he could or could not have done to avoid the defeat, is, vitally important to any understanding of how and why events unfolded as they did at Brega. Not surprisingly, perhaps, as the senior British commander in the Middle East Wavell's recollections and actions feature to some degree in most of the written accounts on the subject.<sup>77</sup> However, as can be judged from the conclusions reached by our first author, we may fairly question how accurately some authors have chronicled Wavell's command in the Middle East.

### **MAJOR-GENERAL HENRY ROWAN-ROBINSON**

Major-General Henry Rowan-Robinson wrote the first account of Wavell's actions in the Middle East in his originally entitled book *Wavell in the Middle East*. The work was published in late 1941 and is the first to relate some details of how and why Cyrenaica was lost. Robinson, who was 68 in 1941, and knew Wavell well, was a distinguished soldier and on his retirement from military duty became a writer on military affairs.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> There are two detailed accounts written by Wavell on his actions in the Middle East in 1940/41 one is his September 1941 report to the British Cabinet and the other is a letter sent to General O'Connor in 1947 both will be reviewed in detail later in the work.

<sup>78</sup> The editors of *Wavell in the Middle East* had this to say about Robinson and his book; 'it deals with a number of stirring events: the Italian invasion of Egypt and Greece; the German occupation of Rumania; the splendid counter-attack of the Greeks; the battle of Taranto; the whole series of General Wavell's victories in Egypt, Libya and Abyssinia. General Robinson is a well known soldier who is also a recognised authority on eastern affairs' (Back cover sheet). The editors it seems cannot bring themselves to even mention the defeat at Brega and Wavell's part in it.

In his 232-page book on Wavell's exploits in North Africa he recounts in some detail the Italian invasion of Egypt, the successful British counter offensive and subsequent defeat of the Italian Army, the defeat of Italian forces in Somalia and British support for Greece. However, for the defeat and withdrawal of British forces at Brega he can find only 24 lines of narrative. His account of the battle is, however, revealing and in many respects typical as we shall see of the way in which later writers have tackled the subject.

Robinson, and he is far from alone, begins his account of the battle by virtually absolving all the senior commanders involved from any blame in the defeat. Robinson instead, as is often to be the case with later writers, chooses to blame just about everything else but poor command decisions for the defeat. In his sparse account of the events leading up to the British withdrawal at Brega Robinson cites three major factors which he considers were the deciding factors in the defeat.

He opens his account thus: 'The first shock to hopeful feeling was caused by the sudden and unexpected appearance of German armoured forces in western Cyrenaica'.<sup>79</sup> Secondly, 'our position at Al Aghaila [the more common spelling in British usage is El Agheila and will be used hereafter in this work] was regarded as particularly strong. The single approach to it from Tripoli was flanked on one side by the sea and on the other by semi-desert and, therefore, appeared easily defensible "except" against tracked vehicles'.<sup>80</sup> Thirdly, 'a single mechanized brigade was watching this approach, the remainder of the armoured division having been withdrawn in part for despatch to Greece and, in part, for very necessary re-fitment after its arduous campaign'.<sup>81</sup> If put simply then, according to Robinson, the British were forced out of Cyrenaica because they had poor intelligence, the enemy used tanks and there was only a

---

<sup>79</sup> Rowan-Robinson, pp. 189/190

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*

single brigade available for defence, as most of the British tanks were either *hors-de-combat* back in Cairo or had been sent to Greece.

Therefore, if we accept Robinson's account as accurate it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that no blame should be given to the commanders for the defeat. His friend Wavell, especially, could not be blamed as all the factors listed above were quite clearly either beyond his control or impossible to rectify through lack of resources. However, Robinson's account of why Brega was lost is not only sparse; it is also open to serious question regarding its accuracy.

His first assertion that the appearance of German armoured forces in western Cyrenaica was "sudden and unexpected" is extremely difficult to accept. There is sound evidence confirming that the British knew in mid February, six weeks before the enemy attacked, that German and Italian troop re-enforcements were landing in Tripoli.<sup>82</sup> It is hard to accept that Robinson did not know, as he was extremely close to the action, that G.H.Q. in Cairo was receiving photographic evidence,<sup>83</sup> taken on an almost daily basis by British pilots, showing that the enemy was unloading tanks in Tripoli harbour almost as fast as they could be got off the ships.<sup>84</sup> By late February the British also knew that the commander of the German forces in Libya was Erwin Rommel.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, if they needed any clearer confirmation that the Germans had arrived in Libya; on 24 February, British forward troops were attacked by German armoured cars.<sup>86</sup>

Robinson's second reason for the defeat was that El Agheila 'appeared easily defensible "except" against tracked vehicles'. The question that must be asked here is why should the bottleneck position at El Agheila be considered by Robinson to be vulnerable to attack from tracked vehicles? The El Agheila position and the Brega

---

<sup>82</sup> Lewin, p. 118.

<sup>83</sup> Irving, p. 66. War diary of German 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division says: 'Intercepted enemy radio messages report having sighted medium tanks. This shows our deception has worked'.

<sup>84</sup> A. J. Smithers, *Rude Mechanicals* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987) p. 82.

<sup>85</sup> Neame, p. 267.

<sup>86</sup> Connell, p. 381.

position for that matter were, in fact, narrow defiles bordered on one side by the sea and on the other by impassable salt marshes. This combination of terrain made blocking either defile; whether to armour or any other kind of attack, relatively easy. Laying minefields across the defiles and covering them with artillery and machine guns would make any attempt to force the defiles extremely difficult and costly even for tracked vehicles.

Robinson's third conclusion is that El Agheila was lost because there was only "one brigade available for defence". However, in the same passage he contradicts himself by claiming that 'our position at El Agheila was regarded as particularly strong'.<sup>87</sup> The truth, as we shall see later, is that neither claim can be substantiated. The British had virtually no troops at El Agheila and certainly none in strongly prepared positions when the Germans attacked.<sup>88</sup> There is evidence that the British did lay a minefield at El Agheila and had a few armoured cars in the area.<sup>89</sup> At the time of the German attack there is further evidence that a troop of Australian anti-tank gunners was also in the vicinity.

However, research for this work can find nothing to corroborate Robinson's claim that the British position at El Agheila was particularly strong. As the officer in charge of defending Cyrenaica at the time, General Wilson, says: 'Owing to commitments with other campaigns, especially in regard to air forces, one had to be content with moving armoured cars and a portion of the Support Group to the frontier between Cyrenaica and Tripoli at a place called Agheila'.<sup>90</sup> As for there only being one brigade available for defence this also incorrect. There was, in fact, another brigade actually involved in the defence which Robinson completely ignores. Moreover, as will be demonstrated later in the work, more forces could quite easily have been made available to the defence.

---

<sup>87</sup> Rowan-Robinson, pp. 189/190.

<sup>88</sup> Wolf Heckmann, *Rommel's War in Africa* (London: Granada, 1981) Heckmann comments on 'the ease with which Streich's small party had occupied Fort El Agheila'. p. 71.

<sup>89</sup> Clifford, p. 82.

<sup>90</sup> Field Marshal Lord Wilson, *Eight Years Overseas 1939-1947* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1948) p. 62.

As can be seen, therefore, Robinson's account of why the British defence of Cyrenaica in February and March 1941 failed is incorrect in virtually every respect. Moreover, it fails in both detail and actuality to give sound and provable reasons for the defeat. This trend, started by Robinson, of giving a very brief description of the events leading up to the defeat at Brega and often misinterpreting or even leaving out altogether important facts relating to the battle, may have been the first, but it has by no means been the last example of this trend. This practise has been continued over many decades by most writers who have addressed this subject.

### **CORRELLI BARNETT**

The next author whose work we shall review is Correlli Barnett and his book on the war in the Middle East *The Desert Generals*. In this most illuminating account, 309-pages in the 1960 edition, of the war in the desert and the senior officers involved in the conflict, Barnett treats his readers to many accurate and detailed reviews of the significant events which occurred in the three plus years of war in the desert. However, for the German breakthrough at Brega he can find only 23 lines of narrative. He begins his sparse account thus: 'Now, on the morrow of Beda Fomm, the apparatus of O'Connor's victories, and their effects, vanished with the suddenness and completeness of a phantom at first light. It is a sad story, quickly told'.<sup>91</sup> He then commences to blame, in a similar vein to Robinson, everything but the British high command for the defeat.

The lack of military preparedness prevalent throughout the Cyrenaica Command he blames on the inexperience of the troops assigned to the defence. As for the scattering on miscellaneous duties throughout Egypt of the experienced Seventh Armoured Division,<sup>92</sup> a decision which many would consider was a serious and indeed dangerous course of action to take; again he can find no one to blame. The mistaken assumption

---

<sup>91</sup> Barnett, p. 62.

<sup>92</sup> Verney, p. 50.

made by the British high command that the attack would not come when it did, on 31 March, but would come in May he considers is perfectly understandable as the intelligence was so poor.

As with Robinson's conclusions it is hard to reconcile any of Barnett's conclusions with the evidence. If we take just one of the reasons Barnett puts forward for the defeat, the lack of intelligence with regard to when the enemy might attack, we may see how little research he must have undertaken and how casually he regards the failure of the commanders on the spot to prepare defensive works. The reality of the situation that the British high command actually found itself confronted with in February/March 1941 clearly indicated that attack was imminent and there was, even in 1960, plenty of evidence available to confirm this fact.

Indeed high calibre and reliable local intelligence was, prior to the attack, available to Wavell in some quantity. This local intelligence gave Wavell clear warning that the enemy was reinforcing his position in Libya.<sup>93</sup> At the end of January, for example, local Bedouin tribesmen were reporting the presence of German officers in Libya.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, Michael Carver, who was actually at HQ Cairo at the time, tells us that: 'Intelligence told Wavell a fortnight after Beda Fomm that German troops had reached Tripoli'.<sup>95</sup> General Verney wrote in 1954 that: 'For some time prior to the end of March there were many indications of the build up of a German Army in Tripolitania, and there was much German air activity from the middle of February onwards'.<sup>96</sup> Virtually every piece of intelligence Middle East Command received throughout February and

---

<sup>93</sup> See F. H. Hinsley, F. W. Winterbotham, *Secret and Personal* (London: William Kimber, 1969). Huge Sebag-Montefiore, *Enigma* (London: Cassell, 2004).

<sup>94</sup> Adrian Fort, *Archibald Wavell: The Life and Times of an Imperial Servant* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009) p. 178.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1986) p. 19.

<sup>96</sup> Verney, p. 51.

March 1941 suggested that attack would come sooner rather than later. Consequently preparations for defence could not commence soon enough.<sup>97</sup>

Wavell himself recognised that attack was imminent and reported to the Chiefs-of-Staff in London on 2 March that ‘the enemy could possibly maintain up to one infantry division and one armoured brigade along the coast road in about three weeks’.<sup>98</sup> This, by Wavell’s own admission, suggests that an attack was possible by 23 March, a week earlier than the actual attack. Moreover, Wavell continued that ‘if they had a second armoured brigade they might send it across the desert to attack the British flank’.<sup>99</sup> They might, he continues, ‘do some offensive patrolling at Agheila and if they found the British screen weak, [which Wavell, as we shall see, knew it was] push on to Agedabia’.<sup>100</sup> However, Barnett makes no reference to Wavell’s well documented appraisal of what the enemy might do and, in fact, what he did do. Nor is there any criticism of Wavell or the high command in general for their complete failure to implement even basic military practices and prepare Cyrenaica for defence.

## JOHN CONNELL

Our next author, John Connell, was again an acquaintance of Wavell. How well they actually knew each other is unclear; however, it is known that they both served in the same theatres of operation and at the same time. Connell worked for Wavell as a propaganda officer at G.H.Q. in Egypt and later in India as Chief Military Censor. In his 1964 work, *Wavell: Scholar and Soldier*, Connell gives us a little bit more in the way of narrative on the events leading up to the battle for Brega devoting as he does about 11 pages, out of his 507-page work, to the event. However, as with Barnett, in his 11 pages he too can find little to criticise in the way the high command prepared the ground prior

---

<sup>97</sup> Robin Neillands, *The Desert Rats* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991) pp. 66/67.

<sup>98</sup> Connell, p. 381.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*



to the battle. Nor any real fault in the way the senior commanders carried out their duties.

For Connell the main reason why the British were unable to adequately defend Brega was their lack of resources. Connell's view is that 'there were not enough troops; there was by no means enough equipment, to go round. If Greece got men, aircraft, tanks, trucks, field guns, A.A. guns, radar and signal equipment, the Western Desert went without'.<sup>101</sup> He adds, like Barnett, that the inexperience of the troops, and for good measure the inexperience of the commanders on the spot, also contributed to the defeat. His view seems to be almost a mirror image of Wavell's, who wrote after the battle that 'everything seems to have gone wrong, tanks broke down and communications broke down, the enemy air making a dead set at all W. T. vehicles. Gambier-Parry<sup>102</sup> was not a sufficiently experienced commander to cope with such a situation; and Neame remained at his H.Q. in Barce'.<sup>103</sup>

Again the pattern is repeated, everyone, except Wavell, is to blame for the defeat at Brega and the subsequent loss of Cyrenaica. It is self evident that the equipment was poor the communications broke down and the commanders were not up to the job. However, the fact that Commander-in-Chief Wavell appointed these commanders and that Commander-in-Chief Wavell was ultimately responsible for seeing that his subordinate commanders had the means to fight for him seems to have completely escaped Connell.

## **BASIL LIDDELL-HART**

The last author this part of the work will review is Basil Liddell-Hart a military theorist who contributed over his long writing career many voluminous tomes to the cannon of military history. Hart's contribution on this subject was published in 1970 in *Liddell-*

---

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*, p. 382.

<sup>102</sup> Major-Gen. M. D. Gambier-Parry at the time of the German attack Gambier-Parry was the commander of 2 Armoured Division and consequently was the senior British commander at Brega.

<sup>103</sup> Connell, p. 391.

*Hart's History of the Second World War*. In this august 713-page tomb, which admittedly covers the whole war and not just events in the Western Desert, Hart donates approximately 34 lines of narrative to the loss of Cyrenaica. Hart gives, as might be expected in such a short appraisal, a very scant account of the events surrounding the German breakthrough at Brega. He fails, in fact, to even mention Brega at all preferring instead to refer to it as 'the bottleneck position east of Agheila'.<sup>104</sup> As for who might be to blame for the loss of the "bottleneck position" Hart gives no names, instead, like so many others before him, he blames all the usual suspects.

The poor intelligence available to Wavell and G.H.Q. in Cairo is first on the list of excuses. Hart confidently informs his reader: 'Rommel's opening thrust at the end of March 1941, and its far-reaching exploitation, created all the greater shock because the possibility of an early advance by the enemy had been discounted on the British side'.<sup>105</sup> He then goes on to mildly criticise the commanders on the spot, again without actually naming them, and again adds to the list of factors which he considers caused the defeat the poor quality of the troops available to the defence. He declares with some authority that 'quality was lacking, both technically and tactically'.<sup>106</sup>

Never once does he question why the excellent defensive position at Brega was not reinforced. Nor does he question why Wavell ordered the forward defence to be abandoned if attacked. The quality of the troops and their poor equipment, dreadful tactical dispositions and lack of technical proficiency are mentioned but little explanation is given as to why, if he is correct, they should find themselves in such an odious position. However, although he acknowledges that the breakthrough at Brega was a very serious blow to the British war effort, and in his words it; 'opened the way for Rommel to enter a desert expanse where he could exploit a wide choice of

---

<sup>104</sup> Hart, p.171.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*

<sup>106</sup> *ibid*, p.172.

alternative routes and alternative objectives’<sup>107</sup> he can find no culprit or culprits responsible for the disaster.

So we may see that attention to detail regarding an event which could so easily have resulted in the British being knocked out of the war has been, at best, poorly recorded and at worst virtually ignored by the authors mentioned above. Moreover, as we shall see in later chapters these authors are by no means by themselves in their scant coverage of this crucial battle. Authors such as Raugh, Schofield, Strawson and Fraser are all just as sparse in their coverage of this crucial event.

However, it must also be stressed that it would be unfair and perhaps unjust to say that in the many books which have been referenced and give accounts of the events which are central to this work that they are all completely worthless and contribute nothing to the debate. In virtually all the works referenced valuable and interesting information has been found which although often confused and sometimes less than accurate gives the researcher clues and pointers which indicate how and why events unfolded at Brega as they did.

## **MORE GENERAL READING**

It would be fair to say that many of the authors who have written accounts reviewing the events surrounding the British defeat at Brega have steered away from open criticism of Wavell. Indeed for the most part all the senior officers involved in the defeat at Brega are exonerated from blame. In Wavell’s case many authors have either ignored his part in the defeat completely or have even commiserated with him in regard to the inadequacy, among many other things, of his subordinate commanders. However, some authors, notably Kenneth Macksey, in *Military Errors of World War*,<sup>108</sup> have found serious shortcomings in his command capabilities.

---

<sup>107</sup> *ibid*

<sup>108</sup> Macksey, p. 75.

As for the commander on the spot at Brega, Neame, ambiguities in regard to his abilities abound. Pitt for example in *The Crucible of War* tells us that Neame was ‘not living up to Wavell’s hopes’.<sup>109</sup> A theme, it has to be said, which has also been echoed by others. Brigadier John Harding, who at the time of the battle was on the General Staff at Neame’s Head Quarters, was so pessimistic about Neame’s abilities that he begged Wavell to replace him.<sup>110</sup> However, not all authors and commentators have been so critical of Neame. A. J. Smithers, for example, in *Rude Mechanicals*,<sup>111</sup> has certain sympathy for the position that Neame found himself in, stating that his army was in a ‘wretched state’.

These ambiguities flagged up several issues which were crucially germane to this work. How, for example, should command function if best results were to be attained on the battlefield? How were armies structured generally, and more specifically, how were they structured in WWII? In an effort to clarify these questions, and several other related topics, many sources were referenced. Information on command was obtained from authors such as Elliot Cohen and his work *Supreme Command*.<sup>112</sup> In regard to how armies were structured generally various sources were reviewed. Christopher Bellamy’s, *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare: Theory and Practice*,<sup>113</sup> was particularly helpful. Bellamy clearly demonstrates the benefits that a well marshalled army brings to the battlefield. In this regard William E. Livezey in his work on Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Mahan on Sea Power*, also confirms Bellamy’s conclusions; his chapter on the doctrine of sea power and the principles of naval strategy being particularly informative in regard to the marshalling of forces.<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 249.

<sup>110</sup> Schofield, p. 183.

<sup>111</sup> Smithers, p. 82.

<sup>112</sup> Cohen, *Supreme Command*

<sup>113</sup> Christopher Bellamy, *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1990)

<sup>114</sup> William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981) pp. 40/55.

For information regarding the origins of force composition and deployment in the modern era, Stephen Biddle, in his work *Military Power*, proved to be very informative. In regard to mobile warfare and how it functioned in the WWII Martin Van Creveld in his work *Command in War*<sup>115</sup> gave useful guidance. Creveld's chapter on mobile warfare gave clear indications of how motor vehicles had changed the pace and scale of forces that could be brought to bear in military engagements. Moreover, it indicated the scale of vehicles required to move and maintain fighting units.

As to the actual composition of Wavell's armed forces in the Middle East various works were referenced. Brian L. Davis, in *The British Army in WWII*<sup>116</sup> gave very precise information on the hierarchy of command prevailing in the British Army in WWII and also gave detailed information on unit composition. Davis's work in regard to specific unit arrangements showed how the command structure worked in each type of significant unit in the British Army. His work detailed the ranks and roles of soldiers from Generals right down to private soldiers. In regard to specific units Davis gives details of the function, composition and equipment of units as diverse as armoured divisions to medical services.

For more detailed information on the actual army units fighting in the Middle East in the early stages of the desert war, George Forty, and his book *The First Victory: O'Connor's Desert Triumph*<sup>117</sup> gave concise information. Forty lists all the significant units fighting in the desert in the research period being referenced. This information enabled unit histories to be scrutinised. Works such as Hector Bolitho's, *The Galloping Third*,<sup>118</sup> the story of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Hussars, Dudley Clarke's, *The Eleventh at War 1934 – 1945*<sup>119</sup> and R.H.W.S. Hastings's, *The Rifle Brigade in the Second World War*<sup>120</sup>,

---

<sup>115</sup> Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) p. 189.

<sup>116</sup> Brian L. Davis, *The British Army in World War Two* (London: Greenhill, Books, 1990)

<sup>117</sup> George Forty, *The First Victory: O'Connor's Desert Triumph* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990)

<sup>118</sup> Hector Bolitho, *The Galloping Third* (London: John Murray, 1963)

<sup>119</sup> Dudley Clarke, *The Eleventh at War 1934-45* (London: Michael Joseph, 1952)

revealed many significant details about the fighting ability and movements of these units. For details of RAF forces available in the Middle East, their quality and quantity, reference was made to works such as John Terrain's, *The Right of the Line*<sup>121</sup> and Philip Guedalla's *Middle East 1940-42: A Study in Air Power*.<sup>122</sup> In regard to naval resources Admiral Cunningham's work *A Sailors Odyssey*<sup>123</sup> and Bernard Ireland's *The War in Mediterranean 1940-43*<sup>124</sup> gave excellent, and in Cunningham's case first hand, accounts, of the availability of shipping in the Middle East.

For details on what traits and abilities make a competent and well rounded commander, again, multiple texts were referenced. Initial research centred on Carl von Clausewitz's seminal work, *On War*.<sup>125</sup> This work revealed many aspects of military competence, such as the commanders need to understand strategy, offensive and defensive operations and military virtues. For further attributes in regard to command and understanding the commanders place on the battlefield Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*<sup>126</sup> was extensively referenced. As strategy and command form such a significant element of the work reading Clausewitz and Sun Tzu led to more detailed reading of authors such as Van Creveld and Colin S. Gray. Gray's *Modern Strategy*<sup>127</sup> was useful in explaining modern strategic thought and how this related to events and actions which occurred at Brega.

As we have seen from the earlier reviews of authors who have contributed to the early desert war, and in regard to this work the contributions they have made in relation to the events surrounding the battle for Brega, intelligence, or the possible lack of intelligence on enemy activities, has been given great credence for the British failure to

---

<sup>120</sup> R.H.W.S. Hastings, *The Rifle Brigade in the Second World War* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950)

<sup>121</sup> John Terrain, *The Right of the Line* (London: Sceptre Books, 1988)

<sup>122</sup> Philip Guedalla, *Middle East 1940-42: A Study in air Power* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944)

<sup>123</sup> Viscount Cunningham, *A Sailors Odyssey* (London: Hutchinson, 1951)

<sup>124</sup> Bernard Ireland, *The War in the Mediterranean 1940-43* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1993)

<sup>125</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* Editors Michael Howard & Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984)

<sup>126</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* Editor Norman Stone (Ware: Wordsworth Reference, 1993)

<sup>127</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

defend their Desert Flank adequately. Consequently research to establish how much or how little Wavell and his subordinate commanders knew of enemy activity in Libya has formed a recurring theme throughout this work.

In all cases, it would be fair to say, the early authors who have chronicled the events prior to the battle of Brega have concluded that poor intelligence significantly contributed to Wavell's mistaken belief that his enemy would not attack him until May at the earliest. As Woollcombe was to write in 1959; 'until about a week before the Athens conference of 22-23 February the balance of his [Wavell's] information was against the likelihood of German infiltration into Libya'.<sup>128</sup> This view was continued, in 1960, by Correlli Barnett in *The Desert Generals* when he wrote: 'Wavell saw no danger in Libya: British intelligence considered that the newly arrived Rommel and his fledgling Italo-German force could not be ready to advance before May'.<sup>129</sup> However, as we know the Germans and their Italian allies were ready to attack Wavell's forces in Libya long before May.

So was there, what we might call, an intelligence gap? Indeed the question must be asked, did Wavell have creditable intelligence which indicated that the Germans had arrived in Libya in strength and if so should he have anticipated an earlier attack. To be fair to our earlier authors this gap in the amount and quality of information on enemy activity available to Wavell was almost impossible for them to gauge. At the time of their writing no detailed accounts of how good, or bad, British intelligence was at this time had been released. However, details of how effective British intelligence had become by 1941 were released in 1969 when F. W. Winterbotham published *Secret and Personal*.<sup>130</sup> Winterbotham was chief of the secret intelligence service from 1930 to 1945 and consequently was able to provide intimate details on British progress in

---

<sup>128</sup> Woollcombe, p. 62.

<sup>129</sup> Barnett, p. 63.

<sup>130</sup> Winterbotham

gaining and reading enemy intelligence. Moreover, since Winterbotham's work was published in 1969 a steady stream of publications dealing with the activities of British intelligence in WWII have been released into the public domain. Notable in this respect was F. H. Hinsley's *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 1; Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*.<sup>131</sup> This work revealed many aspects of what British intelligence knew of German intentions prior to their attack on Brega.

More detailed evidence of what Army Intelligence, via Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), was providing to commanders in the Middle East is provided by Kenneth Macksey. Macksey tells us that; 'in Cyrenaica, in January, clear evidence of an increasing Luftwaffe presence, to be followed in February by army units, had been provided by SIGINT and Ultra'.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, Ralph Bennett in *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy*<sup>133</sup> confirms that on 3 March Wavell was given information, obtained from the recent breaking of the German Air Force Light Blue Enigma key, which told him that the Germans would be ready to attack sooner than expected. Hugh Sebag-Montefiore's *Enigma: The Battle for the Code*<sup>134</sup> gives further details on how much information was available to British intelligence and when it was made available to Army Intelligence in Cairo. More detailed reading of sources such as those mentioned above all indicated that Wavell and his Middle East command knew as early as mid January that the Germans were coming to Libya and as the weeks prior to the 31 March attack passed this information, as we will see in the main work, became more and more certain.

Logistics, with regard to the military requirements needed to either fight defensively, as at Brega, or offensively, as in any offensive operations which might be contemplated, needed to be scrutinised in some detail. Two sources proved to be extremely useful in

---

<sup>131</sup> Hinsley

<sup>132</sup> Macksey, p. 75.

<sup>133</sup> Ralph Bennett, *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy* (New York: William Morrow, 1989).

<sup>134</sup> Sebag-Montefiore, *Enigma: The Battle for the Code*, 2004.



this regard. The Royal Army Service Corps publication, *The Story of the Royal Army Service Corps 1939-1945*<sup>135</sup> and the *History of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps 1920-1945*<sup>136</sup> by A. H. Fernyhough. These publications gave details of virtually all the measures undertaken prior to the 31 March attack to establish a suitable base organisation in Egypt and to quantify what resources were available to support military operations. In a more general sense Martin van Creveld's *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*<sup>137</sup> gave detailed information on how armies are supplied and how logistics can influence battles. These works were very informative on issues such as fuel provision, food and transport.

For detailed information on both armoured and soft skinned vehicles several publications were accessed. In regard to armoured vehicles *Armour in Conflict*<sup>138</sup> by Ian V. Hogg, *Armoured Firepower* by Peter Gudgin and *Tanks of World War 2*<sup>139</sup> by Chris Ellis all gave much useful information. With reference to the operational qualities of British tanks four publications stand out for mention. *Tank Men*<sup>140</sup> by Robert Kershaw, *Winged Dagger*<sup>141</sup> by Roy Farran, *Taming the Panzers*<sup>142</sup> by Patrick Delaforce and *Panzer Bait*<sup>143</sup> by William Moore. These publications gave good insight into how British tank units were organised on a practical operational bases and how they compared to both Italian and German tanks. Accounts of the abilities and performance of German and Italian tanks were sourced from several publications Julian Jackson in his *The Fall of France*<sup>144</sup> gives a good description of German tanks and their *Blitzkrieg*

---

<sup>135</sup> The Royal Army Service Corps, *The Story of the Royal Army Service Corps 1939-1945* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1955)

<sup>136</sup> Fernyhough

<sup>137</sup> Martin Van Creveld, *Supplying War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1196)

<sup>138</sup> Ian V. Hogg, *Armour in Conflict* (London: Jane's Publishing, 1980)

<sup>139</sup> Chris Ellis, *Tanks of World War 2* (London: Octopus Books, 1981)

<sup>140</sup> Robert Kershaw, *Tank Men* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009)

<sup>141</sup> Roy Farran, *Winged Dagger* (London: Cassell, 1998)

<sup>142</sup> Patrick Delaforce, *Taming the Panzers* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000)

<sup>143</sup> William Moore, *Panzer Bait* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991)

<sup>144</sup> Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

tactics. In *Panzerkrieg*<sup>145</sup> Peter McCarthy & Mike Syron give details of both *Blitzkrieg* and of how German tanks performed in the Western Desert.

Soft skinned vehicles played a crucial part in all operations undertaken in the Western Desert and their availability or otherwise features prominently in most accounts of the early desert fighting. The lack of transport was, in fact, cited by Wavell as his 'chief difficulty' in reinforcing and supplying his troops holding the desert flank.<sup>146</sup> Indeed W. G. F. Jackson in *The North African Campaign 1940-43* tells us that: 'Wavell often stressed that shortage of trucks hampered him more than anything else during his campaigns'.<sup>147</sup> This view is echoed by Michael Carver in *Dilemmas of the Desert War* who wrote: 'The principal determining factor in the speed with which [an] advance could be conducted was logistic, and the key to that was the availability of motor transport'.<sup>148</sup>

Consequently this aspect of the battle was investigated in some detail. In regard to the overall amount of transport available in the Middle East several sources proved to be useful. The official histories of both the RASC and the RAOC give quite detailed information on many aspects of transport availability in the Middle East, such as arrival rates, unit composition and vehicle type and purpose. More general sources, Jackson, for example, in *The North African Campaign 1940-43*, gives additional information in this case precise numbers of vehicles arriving from the U.S between January and March 1941.<sup>149</sup>

Technical reference sources were found to be essential in compiling this work.

Titles such as *The Encyclopaedia of Weapons of World War II*,<sup>150</sup> *The World War II*

---

<sup>145</sup> Peter McCarthy & Mike Syron, *Panzerkrieg* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2003)

<sup>146</sup> Connell, p. 389.

<sup>147</sup> W. G. F. Jackson, *The North African Campaign 1940-43* (London: Batsford, 1975) p. 98.

<sup>148</sup> Michael Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2002) p. 17.

<sup>149</sup> Jackson, p. 98.

<sup>150</sup> Bishop

*Data Book*,<sup>151</sup> *British and Commonwealth Armoured Formations (1919-46)*,<sup>152</sup> *Images of War: Afrika – Korps*<sup>153</sup> and *Regiments and Corps of the British Army*<sup>154</sup> by Ian S. Hallows have proved to be indispensable in giving background information on weapons, vehicles, units and illustrations of troops and their equipment in the desert.

Although the main thrust of the work has been to examine the events leading up to the battle of Brega, and the reasons for, and the consequences of, the defeat, from the British perspective German sources (either primary or secondary) written by authors looking at the war in the desert from the German perspective, cannot be ignored. Indeed publications such as *With Rommel in the Desert*<sup>155</sup> by H. W. Schmidt and *Rommel's War in Africa*<sup>156</sup> by Wolf Heckmann, both German authors, and British authors David Irving and his work *The Trail of the Fox*<sup>157</sup> and George Forty and his book *The Armies of Rommel*<sup>158</sup> proved to be extremely useful. These works gave background information on such things as the terrain over which both sides fought and the defensive qualities of the Brega position, as seen from the German stand point. They also served to confirm such things as troop arrival dates, types and quantities of equipment and details of the actual battle. Of particular interest in regard to establishing Rommel's abilities as a commander and additional information on the German presence in Africa two works were helpful, Desmond Young's *Rommel*<sup>159</sup> and Ronald Lewin's *Rommel as Military Commander*.<sup>160</sup>

As the most significant feature in the defeat at Brega was command and the reactions and actions of the senior officers involved their biographies and auto biographies have

---

<sup>151</sup> John Ellis, *The World War II Data Book* (London: BCA, 1993)

<sup>152</sup> Duncan Crow, *British and Commonwealth Armoured Formations (1919-46)* (Windsor: Profile Publications, 1972)

<sup>153</sup> Ian Baxter, *Images of War Afrika – Korps* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008)

<sup>154</sup> Ian. S. Hallows, *Regiments and Corps of the British Army* (London: New Orchard, 1994)

<sup>155</sup> H. W. Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert* (London: Harrap, 1951)

<sup>156</sup> Heckmann

<sup>157</sup> Irving.

<sup>158</sup> George Forty, *The Armies of Rommel* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1999)

<sup>159</sup> Desmond Young, *Rommel* (London: Collins, 1950)

<sup>160</sup> Ronald Lewin, *Rommel as Military Commander* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004)

contributed enormously to this work. Regrettably of the six most senior officers involved in the events surrounding the battle of Brega, that is Wavell, Neame, Wilson, Gambier-Parry, Rimington and Latham, only Neame and Wilson wrote up their memoirs. This absence of memoirs, in the case of Wavell at least, is extremely surprising. Wavell it must be noted was a prolific author who wrote most of his life. Yet when it comes to what must be in any commanders' life the biggest and most significant event he could possibly be involved in, a World War, Wavell chooses not to give his side of the story. Bernard Fergusson in his book on Wavell, *Wavell Portrait of a Soldier*<sup>161</sup> tells his readers that Wavell confided to him in February 1950 that he was about to write his memoirs, and had even thought of a title, they were to be called *Reasons in Writing*.<sup>162</sup> However, even though Wavell had been largely unemployed for over two years before his death in May 1950 he never wrote his memoirs and even now access to his personal papers is denied by the Wavell family and they are still not in the public domain.

Wavell's reticence in writing his memoirs is all the more surprising when one realises that he wrote for money. He was never a wealthy man and the money he received from writing supplemented his army pay. Had Wavell written his autobiography or even just an account of his time in World War II it would, in all probability, have earned Wavell some very useful additional income. Moreover, as even at the time Wavell was receiving considerable criticism from some of his colleagues for his command decisions in the war, criticism it has to be said Wavell strongly refuted; it seems odd that he did not use a book to rebut some of these adverse question marks over his actions in the war.

The above being said many authors have written accounts of Wavell's life and his actions in WWII. As mentioned Henry Rowan-Robinson, wrote *Wavell in the Middle*

---

<sup>161</sup> Rowan-Robinson.

<sup>162</sup> Bernard Fergusson, *Wavell: Portrait of a Soldier* (London: Collins, 1961) p. 11.

*East* in 1941. This work has been followed by at least five major works on Wavell and his life. In 1961 Bernard Fergusson gave a very personal account of Wavell's early army life and war career. However, whether Fergusson's account is unbiased is open to question. Fergusson informs his reader that: 'I shall be grateful all my life for the fortunate chance that brought me into his orbit'.<sup>163</sup> Several other accounts of Wavell's life have followed in subsequent years. Robert Woollcombe's work on Wavell, *The Campaigns of Wavell 1939-43*,<sup>164</sup> was published in 1959. In 1964, John Connell, as referred to earlier, wrote *Wavell Scholar and Soldier*.<sup>165</sup> Ronald Lewin, wrote *The Chief*<sup>166</sup> in 1980. Harold E. Raugh, Jr contributed *Wavell in the Middle East 1939-1941*<sup>167</sup> in 1993. This last work is a very focused look at Wavell's early war career and proved to be extremely useful in the research. The most recent work on Wavell has been contributed by Victoria Schofield, in *Soldier & Statesman* 2006.<sup>168</sup> From these works it has been possible to build up a very detailed understanding of Wavell's early life and his army career. Unfortunately word restrictions have made it impossible to include any details of Wavell's early life in the main work.

General Maitland Wilson, who did write up his memoirs in his 1948 work *Eight Years Overseas 1939-47*,<sup>169</sup> was Wavell's second in command and played an important part in many of Wavell's campaigns. Consequently his first hand accounts of some of the crucial stages of the early desert war were found to be very helpful. General Philip Neame V. C. also wrote up his memoirs in his 1947 work *Playing with Strife*.<sup>170</sup> This work proved very helpful in clarifying many aspects of the command structure in

---

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*

<sup>164</sup> Woollcombe

<sup>165</sup> Connell

<sup>166</sup> Lewin

<sup>167</sup> Raugh

<sup>168</sup> Schofield

<sup>169</sup> Wilson

<sup>170</sup> Neame

Cyrenaica and gave details of what was discussed at the pivotal 16/18 March meeting between Neame and Wavell.

As for the other senior officers they remained mostly silent on the events surrounding their part in the defeat at Brega. Such details of their part in the Brega defeat that have been gleaned have come mostly from the accounts by Wilson, Neame and the authors of work on Wavell. In the case of Rimington further information was contributed in a very illuminating report on his actions just after the defeat at Brega by Brigadier John Coomb. This information was found in the O'Connor papers in the Liddell-Hart centre at the University of London. One further source which proved to be very helpful in detailing Wavell's domestic life in Cairo and to some extent his military activities was Peter Coats book *Of Generals and Gardens*.<sup>171</sup> Coats was Wavell's ADC and with him almost constantly during the early desert campaigns including the defeat at Brega. His recollections of daily life in Cairo in the Wavell household and accounts of many of the crucial meetings which took place in the months before the defeat at Brega provided invaluable insight into how Wavell lived and made decisions.

As mentioned in the methodology the various unit war diaries referenced<sup>172</sup> in the Public Records Office (PRO) at Kew proved to be invaluable in confirming such things as unit movement, manpower and state and quantity of equipment. Unfortunately the war diary of the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Rifle Brigade, the main infantry component of the defence at Brega, did not survive the German attack on 31 March but of the rest of the units involved all their war diaries survive. The reading and photo copying of the information in the relevant documents in the PRO, found in over twenty unit diaries and reports, required seven separate visits totalling over 90 hours of study.

The literature available to conduct this research project was it has to be said, extensive. However, this did not make the project easy to research. The various threads

---

<sup>171</sup> Peter Coats, *Of Generals and Gardens* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976)

<sup>172</sup> A full list of the unit diaries referenced is found in the bibliography.

of the project had to be meticulously drawn together before even a partial picture of what happen on 31 March 1941 began to appear. Conflicting and contradictory accounts of the battle, the personalities involved, the terrain, transport, intelligence and even the quality and serviceability of the weapons used by the various combatants, to list but a few of the topics researched, have all required detailed investigation before they could be fitted, with confidence, into the overall picture.

Investigations have ranged from reading perhaps five or six first hand accounts of an incident, to gain an accurate understanding of how events unfolded, to scrutinising the actions of a single individual, such as Wavell. Technical manuals and or reference books have been used extensively to establish, definitively, how, for example, particular weapons, vehicles or pieces of equipment functioned in the various situations in which they were used. The reader can therefore be confident that the account offered here of the battle for Mersa El Brega is both precise and accurate.

## ELEMENTS OF COMMAND

King Richard III to his subordinate commanders on the eve of The Battle of Bosworth Field, '*Come, noble gentlemen, let us survey the vantage of the ground. Call for some men of sound direction: Let's lack no discipline, make no delay, for, lords, to-morrow is a busy day*'. William Shakespeare, "*The Tragedy of King Richard the Third*" Richard III Act V scene 3.<sup>173</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Alfred Thayer Mahan,<sup>174</sup> the influential American naval and military thinker, wrote that; 'not by rambling operations or naval duels are wars decided, but by force, massed

---

<sup>173</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Atlantis, 1980) p. 516.

<sup>174</sup> Livezey, Mahan, Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) naval historian and strategist.

and handled in skilful combinations'.<sup>175</sup> One of the essential ingredients of military affairs; and the ingredient which often dictates whether a battle, campaign or war is won or lost is how skilfully the commander involved masses and handles his forces. As Mahan clearly observes, the skill and quality of the commander and the soundness of the command structures under which he operates often decide military duels. This part of the work will, therefore, have as its objective a two-fold role. Firstly the work will seek to explain, in a broad-brush approach, how command structures in WWII functioned. The work's second objective will be to describe in some detail what personal traits and abilities make a successful commander or what Carl von Clausewitz calls, a "Military Genius".<sup>176</sup>

## **THE STRUCTURE OF COMMAND**

Turning firstly to the structures of command under which virtually all commanders in WWII operated, we may say that most of the structures adopted by the various combatants in WWII broadly conformed to a similar pattern. Inside the world's war rooms, which in Britain's case in WWII were situated in London, there was the administrative body, consisting of the War Cabinet headed by the Prime Minister, advised and assisted by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (C.I.G.S) and his service heads from the Army, Navy and Air Force. The first rank of commander outside the war rooms was the theatre or area commander. This commanding general, we may call him Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C), would have at his command all of the military forces in a given area. In the case of Britain, for example, this might be command of the home army, tasked to defend the home island, or perhaps a more distant region such as Middle East Command.

---

<sup>175</sup> Bellamy, p. 13.

<sup>176</sup> Clausewitz, p. 111.



The size of such commands could, and did, vary wildly. Again using the British experience as our paradigm we may see that the pre-war Middle East Command area was huge. The C-in-C, Middle East Command, in 1939, had under his 'command all British land forces in Egypt, the Sudan, Palestine, Transjordan and Cyprus, and when Britain's ultimatum to Hitler ran out on September 3 the Army formations in British Somaliland, Aden, Iraq and along the shores of the Persian Gulf also came under his command. The area for which he had thereby accepted military responsibility measured some 1,800 miles by 2,000 and included nine different countries in two continents'.<sup>177</sup>

The role that the C-in-C plays in the military theatre he commands is to be primarily a controlling force administering to the needs of his often-disparate subjects. 'The ideal senior commander may be viewed as a device for receiving, processing and transmitting information in a way, which will yield the maximum gain for the minimum cost. Whatever else he may be, he is part telephone exchange and part computer'.<sup>178</sup> In the military sphere the C-in-C is the coordinator of everything the army needs to exist. He must ensure that his army is supplied with a vast panoply of goods and services. These services might range from an adequate food supply, accommodation, weapons and sanitary services, to military justice.<sup>179</sup>

Furthermore, the mechanisation of the military in more modern times has only served to add more tasks to the C-in-C's list of responsibilities. As Christopher Bellamy observes; 'by the nineteenth century, and through to 1945, success in war was arguably dependent, more than any other single factor, on the logistic/organisational element: the ability to train, raise and deploy mass armies and to feed and supply them in the field'.<sup>180</sup> The operative responsibility of the C-in-C we may say therefore is to be an

---

<sup>177</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 1.

<sup>178</sup> Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico, 1994) p. 28.

<sup>179</sup> Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985) p. 6.

<sup>180</sup> Bellamy, p. 12.

enabler rather than a fighter. As an example of how this enabling role manifests itself in practical military terms we may look no further than to the actions of U.S. General, Dwight Eisenhower in 1944,<sup>181</sup> with regard to what might seem on the face of it a mundane subject the amount of landing craft he had been assigned to undertake the D-Day landings, Operation *Overlord*. Eisenhower's decisions in respect of this one element of the invasion force may serve as a potent example of how critical a commanders enabling role, rather than his fighting abilities, can be in influencing battlefield outcomes.

When reviewing the amount of landing craft he had been assigned Eisenhower was unconvinced that he had enough of these indispensable vessels to carry out the many tasks he knew his invading forces would have to perform. It was known that the Germans had emplaced thousands of obstacles on the invasion beaches. Eisenhower and his planners realised that if the first wave of landing craft touched down at high tide, as had been planned, then large numbers might be wrecked on the beach obstacles and the whole operation jeopardised.<sup>182</sup> He felt therefore that he 'had to have 271 landing craft beyond those already assigned to *Overlord*, and to have them he decided, within a week of his arrival in London, to put D-Day back a month, from May 1 to early June, in order to have available an extra months production of landing craft'.<sup>183</sup>

Eisenhower's decision proved to be doubly prudent and enabled his assaulting troops to weather the loss of many landing craft in the Omaha Beach disaster, and the subsequent losses sustained in the later channel storms.<sup>184</sup> Even with these losses because of Eisenhower's insistence on the extra landing craft he was still able to

---

<sup>181</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower Soldier and President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990) pp 120/121.

<sup>182</sup> Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (London: Collins, 1952) p. 194.

<sup>183</sup> Ambrose, p. 124.

<sup>184</sup> Adrian R. Lewis, For overall view of Omaha beach landings see; *Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory* (Stroud: Tempus Books, 2004)

maintain the momentum of the landings which ultimately gave his field commanders the necessary men and materials to bring him success on the battlefield.<sup>185</sup>

## **SUBORDINATE COMMAND**

Moving down the chain of command from the C-in-C we may see that command structures in all military establishments rely heavily on subordinate commanders. If a C-in-C, for example, needs to attack out of his command area, as General Eisenhower did in 1944 in Operation *Overlord*, or his command area is attacked, as General Wavell's was in 1940, then the C-in-C rarely, if ever, actually fights the battles personally. Having enabled the forces under his command, to the best of his ability with the resources they require, a C-in-C usually hands over the actual fighting to his subordinate commanders. These subordinate commanders are commonly known as army or field commanders. These generals would be responsible for sub-regions within the theatre and could be tasked with either using the forces allocated to them, large or small, to defend their command region or use their forces to attack from it. These commanders take on the military tasks the C-in-C deems necessary, beneficial or advantageous to his command overall. With such a heavy burden of responsibility, therefore, subordinate commanders need to be carefully chosen by the C-in-C if favourable outcomes on the battlefield are to be attained.

There is in Clausewitz's view a major difference 'between a commander-in-chief-a general who leads the army as a whole or commands in a theatre of operations-and the senior generals immediately subordinate to him'.<sup>186</sup> Clausewitz considers that the difference between the C-in-C and his subordinates arises from the fact that commanders in the second levels of command are subjected to much greater

---

<sup>185</sup> Humphrey Wynn & Susan Young, For an overall view of pre planning for Overlord see; *Prelude to Overlord* (Shrewsbury: Airlife Publishing, 1983) Also see Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (London: Collins, 1952)

<sup>186</sup> Clausewitz, p. 111.

supervision and control by their C-in-Cs and that this gives them far less scope to indulge in independent thought. Moreover, Clausewitz observes that some people consider that outstanding intellectual and military ability is only needed by the C-in-C and that in subordinated commanders a more general level of intelligence can be acceptable. Clausewitz strongly disagrees with this assertion and considers that even junior positions of command require outstanding intellectual qualities if outstanding military achievements are to be gained. Furthermore, as the demands on subordinate officer's rise with every step up the promotional ladder they take then their abilities also consequently need to rise if they are to fulfil their roles with distinction.<sup>187</sup>

For Clausewitz good subordinate officers are highly desirable, if not essential, to the whole command structure and their worth should never be devalued or underestimated. Their "practical intelligence", as Clausewitz terms it, 'although different to the polymath scholar, the far-ranging business executive, and the statesman, is highly desirable on the battlefield'.<sup>188</sup>

## **ARMY ORGANISATION**

In organisational terms most armies in WWII conformed to a similar pyramid like hierarchical command structure. At the top of the military pyramid would be the C-in-C with, as mentioned, army or field commanders directly below him. Army/Field commanders could, theoretically, have any number of troops under their command but would usually have an army of approximately 70,000 men split between two corps. A British field army, for example, was 'similar to that found in the U.S. Army, each consisting of a headquarters, certain organic troops, and a variable number of divisions

---

<sup>187</sup> *ibid*

<sup>188</sup> *ibid*

and corps'.<sup>189</sup> In the British army, an infantry corps, approximately 35,000 men, was usually composed of two divisions.<sup>190</sup> Each division usually contains three brigades and each brigade consists of three battalions with each battalion being made up of approximately 800 officers and men.

Within the army organisation set out above the division is arguably the most useful and valuable individual unit to a field commander. The role of a division, according to Shelford Bidwell in *Gunners at War* is to be a; 'force of all arms sufficiently strong to act on its own as a wing or tentacle of the army. In the attack it must be able to grip and retain hold of the enemy force until the rest of the army can come up to finish it off, and in the defence it must be able to hold out for a period against the worst the enemy can do until the *masse de manoeuvre* in reserve can arrive'.<sup>191</sup>

Divisions, when properly constituted, can operate totally independently having organically all the requirements needed to function and fight. German Panzer General Heinz Guderian's concept was that each panzer division should 'be an army in miniature. A division would be a self-contained, all-arms unit - that is to say, it would contain tanks, infantry, artillery, engineers, reconnaissance, anti-tank and anti-aircraft units as well as supply services, all the units necessary to fight and survive in the field, independent of reinforcements and supplies for as long as possible. Each division should carry enough fuel, ammunition and other supplies to be fully self-sufficient for at least five days'.<sup>192</sup>

In regard to sustainability in the field, a British infantry division in WWII would typically have, aside from its 9 infantry battalions, supporting arms consisting 'of 3 field artillery regiments, 1 medium artillery regiment, 1 anti-tank regiment; 1 divisional reconnaissance regiment, signals, Royal Army Service Corps (QM), engineer, medical,

---

<sup>189</sup> Davis, p. 10.

<sup>190</sup> *ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>191</sup> Bidwell, pp. 166/167.

<sup>192</sup> McCarthy & Syron, *Panzerkrieg*, 2003, p. 27.

ordnance, provost, and other units as required'.<sup>193</sup> The German 5 Light Division on deployment to Libya in January 1941 had, apart from similar levels of military equipment found in British divisions, a 'Telephone Company, Special Supply Staff Company, Water Columns, Water Purification Columns, and Heavy Water Columns'.<sup>194</sup> These levels of establishment allowed 5 Light Division to fight in the desert for quite long periods of time without the need to call on the assistance of external services.

This value and ability is, however, variable, as it is undoubtedly the case that some divisions carry out their military duties more efficiently than others. There can of course be many reasons why some divisions do not perform as well as others, lack of equipment, insufficient time for training and inadequate weapons, to mention but a few. However, as the experiences of the U.S. 88<sup>th</sup> Division cited below suggest given a similar body of men enough time to train them and an equal issue of weapons, a divisional commander who understands the business of war will invariably create a superior division.

### **U.S. 88<sup>th</sup> INFANTRY DIVISION**

The excellent battlefield results obtained by the U.S. 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division serve to illustrate that a commander of quality can, and often does, create a more efficient fighting force. 'The 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was activated at Camp Gruber, Oklahoma on 15 July 1942 under the command of Major General John E. Sloan'.<sup>195</sup> At the inauguration ceremony, of the newly reinstated division, the President of the 88<sup>th</sup> Division Veterans Association, said to Sloan, "take up the job we didn't get done." In response, referring to the Great War veterans present, General Sloan assured onlookers that, "their faith will be sustained, their record maintained and the glory of the colours

---

<sup>193</sup> Davis, p. 22.

<sup>194</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, p. 82.

<sup>195</sup> The 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association, 2002-2008, <http://www.88infdiv.org/>

never will be sullied as long as one man of the 88<sup>th</sup> still lives’.”<sup>196</sup> With such confidence in the ability of his men it was, perhaps, not surprising that the 88<sup>th</sup> under Sloan’s command became one of the best divisions in the U.S. Army. As Colonel Dupuy observes, when reviewing the record of the 88<sup>th</sup> Division in *Understanding War*, ‘the most important factor appears to be leadership by the divisional commander’.<sup>197</sup>

## **GOOD COMMANDERS MAKE GOOD UNITS**

So why was Sloan so successful? Prior to WWII Sloan had held an impressive array of posts in the U.S. military. Although Sloan had never been tested by battle his rapid promotions marked him out as, potentially, an exceptional soldier, and his knowledge of military science and tactics confirmed his credentials as a scholar of military command. As John Sloan Brown comments; ‘patterns that emerge in Sloan’s biography include appreciable troop duty, twelve years as an instructor in army schools or ROTC, and the number of occasions in which he created new organisations where none had existed’.<sup>198</sup> With this impressive record behind him it was, perhaps, inevitable that when the U.S. entered WWII and began raising new Divisions that Sloan should be one of the first to be given command of one of the new units.

Sloan’s new division turned out to be the 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and in common with other divisional commanders in most armies of the time, Sloan had little influence over which officers and enlisted men were assigned to his new command. The men assigned to the 88<sup>th</sup> were, in fact, just as raw and inexperienced as most of the other recruits hurriedly drafted into the U.S. Army after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. However, Sloan, as his record indicates, was not raw or inexperienced he was a professional soldier of many years standing and as it turned out an

---

<sup>196</sup> *ibid*

<sup>197</sup> T. N. Dupuy, *Understanding War: History and Theory of Combat* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992) p. 117.

<sup>198</sup> John Sloan Brown, *Draftee Division* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986) p. 23.

inspirational leader. As Dupuy comments; ‘by example and by tireless supervision and guidance, Sloan seems to have been able to instil his own high standards of conduct and leadership in all of the officers directly below him and, through them, in all other officers and non-commissioned officers of the division’.<sup>199</sup>

The men of the 88<sup>th</sup> initially resented Sloan’s strict discipline, attention to detail and the rigorous training regimes he put them through. However, after their first few weeks in combat their opinion of Sloan, and what he had made them, began to change. ‘They were proud to be in a division that they knew to be an excellent, outstanding unit, and they realised that the man primarily responsible was Sloan’.<sup>200</sup> This division and its commander were a valuable and prized asset to their army commander and achieved great success in battle. ‘The performance of the 88<sup>th</sup> Division demonstrates that a commander who has an understanding of the components of a theory of combat can make use of that understanding to influence battle outcomes’.<sup>201</sup>

## **SO WHAT MAKES A COMPETENT COMMANDER?**

*History and posterity reserve the name of "genius" for those who have excelled in the highest positions -as commanders-in-chief- since here the demands for intellectual and moral powers are vastly greater.*<sup>202</sup> Carl von Clausewitz

## **PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES AND TRAITS**

So what characteristics does a commander require to make him a competent commander or hopefully Clausewitz’s “Military Genius”? In order to answer this question Clausewitz advises us that; ‘what we must do is to survey all those gifts of mind and temperament that in combination bear on military activity. These taken together constitute the essence of military geniuses.’<sup>203</sup> In his view military; ‘genius consists in a

---

<sup>199</sup> Dupuy, p.119.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid*, p. 120.

<sup>201</sup> *ibid*, p. 121.

<sup>202</sup> Clausewitz, p.111.

<sup>203</sup> *ibid*, p.100.



harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest'.<sup>204</sup> For Clausewitz, therefore, we may say that intellectual powers working in harmony play the greatest role in the higher forms of military capability.

To the above Clausewitz adds courage and determination 'war is the realm of danger; therefore courage is the soldier's first requirement'.<sup>205</sup> While 'the role of determination is to limit the agonies of doubt and the perils of hesitation when the motives for action are inadequate. Colloquially the term determination applies to a propensity for daring, pugnacity, boldness and temerity'.<sup>206</sup> To these qualities Clausewitz's also adds staunchness, presence of mind, firmness and strength of character. John Keegan, in his book *The Mask of Command*, adds, being a known presence to his troops and leading by example to this list. 'The first and greatest imperative of command, Keegan advises, is to be present in person. Those who impose risk must be seen to share it'.<sup>207</sup> In *The Art of War* the Chinese potentate and war leader Sun Tzu, more than 2,500 years before Clausewitz, advised that a commander should possess the following attributes; 'wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage, tenacity and strictness'.<sup>208</sup>

Sun Tzu further recognised that the scope of a military commander's responsibilities must encompass more than just the immediate battlefield. All senior military commanders must be able to make the best use of the economic, military and political resources placed at their disposal whether these resources are plentiful or scarce. Sun Tzu recognised 'that a military struggle was not only a competition between military forces, but also a comprehensive conflict embracing politics, economics, military force

---

<sup>204</sup> *ibid*

<sup>205</sup> *ibid*, p. 101.

<sup>206</sup> *ibid*, pp. 102/103.

<sup>207</sup> John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987) p. 329.

<sup>208</sup> Sun Tzu: Stone, *The Art of War*, 1993, p. 20.

and diplomacy'.<sup>209</sup> Even the "Military Genius" must take account of the political, economic and military factors surrounding him, as he does not, indeed cannot, function as some independent entity, he is inevitably tied to the body politic of his home administration, the economic resources available and the amount of industrial capacity supporting his endeavours. Clausewitz concurs recognising; 'that although a commander-in-chief must be a statesman; he must not cease to be a general. On the one hand, he is aware of the entire political situation; on the other, he knows exactly how much he can achieve with the means at his disposal'.<sup>210</sup>

Dupuy confirms that these realities also hold true in a more modern context. He considers that as the scope of war expanded in the twentieth century, and inevitably became more complex, many theoreticians, such as those on the German General Staff in WWII, realised that the scope of strategy in war was correspondingly expanding. Strategy now had to take into account, and deal with, non military considerations such as politics and economics; while at the same time often dealing with the problems of fighting wars on more than one front with several allies.<sup>211</sup>

These conflicting aspects of command, such as cooperating with allies, are perhaps no more clearly illuminated than by examining the relationship between Eisenhower and his political masters on the one hand and his multi national subordinate commanders on the other. To overcome these potentially damaging conflicts, Eisenhower the U.S. General under the ultimate command of an American President, chose as his deputy, Arthur Tedder, a British airman, under the ultimate command of the British Prime Minister. 'Their co-operation as Supreme Commander and Deputy, with the latter having authority for air operations, proved a triumphant solution to the

---

<sup>209</sup> *ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>210</sup> Clausewitz, p. 112.

<sup>211</sup> Dupuy, p. 66.

problems of national loyalties, sensitiveness over seniority and dogged pursuit of policies at variance with the objectives of *Overlord*'.<sup>212</sup>

Colin Gray, in his book *Modern Strategy*, adds that; 'quality of command invariably makes a strategic difference, which is to say it is a dimension of strategy contributing to overall strategic effect'.<sup>213</sup> Gray recognises, and it would be difficult to disagree with his assessment, that command is an important dimension of strategy. However, important as strategic understanding is, it is not always present, even in otherwise sound, or even excellent, soldiers.

## UNDERSTANDING OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

The use of technology, and an understanding of new methods of warfare, and the advantages that new technologies might bring to the battlefield, are seen by many commentators, Clausewitz, Dupuy and Mahan, for example, as highly desirable qualities in any commander. As Dupuy, succinctly points out: 'Technology wins wars. It would be a dim-witted historian indeed who would suggest that the echeloned, refused flank, formation of Alexander the Great at Arbela could have fought on equal terms with the echeloned, refused flank formation of Frederick the Great at Leuthen'.<sup>214</sup> This is of course an extreme, and improbable, example of the difference that a new technology introduced onto the battlefield could make, but the point is nonetheless easy to understand.

Moreover, when one examines the advantages to the commander that new technology can bring to the battlefield it is, perhaps, easy to understand why this should be the case. Stephen Biddle, in his work *Military Power*, identifies the benefits of new technology thus: '[T]echnological change since 1918 has had three main effects:

---

<sup>212</sup> Wynn & Young, p. 22.

<sup>213</sup> Gray, p. 39.

<sup>214</sup> Dupuy, p. 213. The battle of Arbela was fought in 331 BC; the battle of Leuthen was fought in 1757.

continued increases in firepower and lethality; greater mobility over longer distances; and the ability to see, communicate, and process information in greater volumes over larger areas'.<sup>215</sup> As William E. Livezey writes in *Mahan on Sea Power*: 'it cannot be argued that the phenomenal advances in military and naval technology in the past century in the fields of propulsion, armour, ordnance, and weapons have had far-reaching repercussions'.<sup>216</sup>

As an example of how dangerous the repercussions of ignoring new technology could be, we may look to the British naval high commands refusal at the start of the twentieth century to appreciate how devastating new submarine technology would become. 'In Britain the submarine was not viewed with favour by some of the longer established naval officers and was regarded by some as a damned un-English weapon'.<sup>217</sup> The Germans were not so reluctant to adopt new submarine technology. They realised that Britain relied on its Navy to guarantee safe passage of its trade routes and to dominate militarily the high-seas which consequently ensured that Britain's military position in the world remained unchallenged. They reasoned therefore that if they could sink enough British shipping they might break Britain's world dominance and ultimately make the home island vulnerable. As they were too far behind Britain in the building of surface warships they opted for submarines and embraced the new technology.

By the start of WWI the Germans had 10 modern boats each powered by new diesel engines and many more were under construction.<sup>218</sup> These vessels were quick and cheap to build and, as the British surface fleet had very little in the way of counter measures to repulse their attacks, were ultimately highly successful. 'The impact of

---

<sup>215</sup> Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) p.53.

<sup>216</sup> Livezey, pp. 314/315.

<sup>217</sup> Anthony Watts, *Submarines and Submersibles* (London: Ward Lock Ltd, 1976) p.11.

<sup>218</sup> Tim Benbow, *Naval Warfare 1914-1918* (London: Amber Books, 2008) p. 88.

submarines in World War I was greater than anyone had anticipated beforehand. The U-boat campaign was perhaps Germany's best chance of forcing Britain out of the war'.<sup>219</sup> Indeed ignoring this un-English weapon nearly brought Britain to its knees in both World Wars.

The effect of new military technology, suddenly introduced onto the battlefield or applied more methodically over the course of an engagement, can, and has, the submarine being a classic example; quite literally change the course of war. However, it must also be stressed that wars are not usually won by new technology alone. There is certainly an argument which suggests that wars are won with technology rather than by technology. Nonetheless it would, evidence seems to suggest, be a foolish commander who ignored the advantages that new technologies might give him. Indeed in regard to this work we shall see that had Wavell had a better understanding of the new technologies being used against him such as, dive bombers, anti tank guns and tanks, then his defence at Brega might have had more of a chance of success.

## **WORKING WITH THE SYSTEM**

Norman Dixon, in *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, adds a further quality that all commanders, and certainly our "Commander of Genius", must assimilate if they are to be successful on the battlefield, a complete understanding of the workings and machinations of the military system under which they operate. Dixon likens the actions of the military system to those of 'a computer or telephone exchange whose *modus operandi* is based on rules which may have little relevance to the tasks it is called upon to perform'.<sup>220</sup> As his example of how restricting the system can be Dixon invites us to 'imagine a telephone exchange that, for the honour of the post office, has to follow the

---

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.* p. 88.

<sup>220</sup> Dixon, p. 34.

rule that all telephonists should have red hair, 38-inch busts and heavily lidded eyes'.<sup>221</sup> Such rules close off many alternatives, petite blonds for example; however, unfortunately, the rules of the system must be obeyed even if obeying them impairs the functioning of the organisation.

As an example of how frustrating the rules of the system could be we may look to a set of rules in force in the Middle East at the beginning of WWII. 'Troops already in the Middle East drew clothing allowance, paid for boot repairs and so on. Meanwhile reinforcements from India, Australia and the UK were on active service scales and did not draw clothing allowance'.<sup>222</sup> This obviously caused extra work for the already hard-pressed personnel of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) who, as there was a war on, had more important tasks to carry out. This waste of effort is not lost on the official historian of the RAOC who points out: '[T]hese complications increased the difficulties of the RAOC and hampered preparations for war'.<sup>223</sup>

As Kenneth Macksey points out in *Military Errors of World War Two* 'misconceived doctrines arrived at through the sheer inability to foresee the future through the cloud of unimaginable innovations or changing circumstances have their impact, leading not only to the acquisition of inadequate equipment but also to the adoption of organisations and methods which, hamper, if not cripple, the true function of command'.<sup>224</sup> Military institutions, methods, doctrines and practises, although supposedly designed to assist commanders, can, and often do, have a detrimental effect on a commanders abilities and the quality of his decisions. The French high command, for example, viewed their fortified defence system, the Maginot Line, as invincible. However, when the Germans attacked, the adoption of the Maginot Line and the organisation and methods supporting it, did, in fact, hamper, if not cripple, the French Army's ability to defend its territory

---

<sup>221</sup> *ibid*, p. 34.

<sup>222</sup> Fernyhough, p. 111.

<sup>223</sup> *ibid*

<sup>224</sup> Macksey, p. 10.

from attack, coming as it did from an unexpected direction. ‘This fortified system was simply by-passed by the German panzer divisions and left for the follow-up troops to reduce at their leisure’.<sup>225</sup>

However, competent commanders, and again certainly our “Commanders of Genius”, seem to be able to overcome the restrictions of the system and, working within the constraints of the system, still achieve military success. As Van Creveld observes; ‘it is virtually certain that some breaks and errors will occur, a fact that a wise commander will take into account and provide for. While failure to do so may well result in catastrophe, it is equally true that not even the greatest victories in history resulted from anything like a perfect command system; in many cases, indeed, victories were won in spite of rather than because of, the way the army’s command system operated’.<sup>226</sup> As Vladimir Peniakoff, the creator of one of the most successful irregular units in WWII says in his book *Private Army*; ‘There is an art to disobeying orders and no commander who has not mastered it can hope to win battles’.<sup>227</sup>

Indeed the roll call of generals who have mastered this art is impressive. Napoleon, for example, in his early military career devised an innovative and unorthodox, but ultimately successful, system for using cannon. Indeed throughout his military career Napoleon proved to be ‘a masterful artillerist, a commander who, in the apt phrase of Victor Hugo, massed and aimed his cannon like a single pistol shot’.<sup>228</sup> This revolutionary use of cannon went against established doctrine and was not easily accepted by the systems masters. However, Napoleon’s willingness to break with accepted usage and risk censure from his superiors contributed to both battlefield success and his rapid rise to power.

---

<sup>225</sup> Peter Young Ed, *Decisive Battles of the Second World War* (London: Bison Books, 1988) p. 15.

<sup>226</sup> Van Creveld, p. 9.

<sup>227</sup> Vladimir Peniakoff, *Private Army* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1950) p. 47.

<sup>228</sup> Curt Johnson, *Artillery: The Big Guns go to War* (London: Octopus Books, 1975) p. 7.

German General, Heinz Guderian, who is often referred to as the father of German armoured warfare in WWII, was treated almost with contempt by the system under which he worked. He saw the advantages of tank warfare long before his superiors and wanted to raise specialist tank units, which would be created by converting cavalry units, to armour. This was an anathema to the traditionalists. He was therefore initially compelled to; ‘bypass trouble by distributing the armour through the existing regiments and then completely mechanising them; they might change their role but would not change their title or insignia’.<sup>229</sup> This bending of the systems rules satisfied the traditionalists and laid the foundations for one of the most devastating operational concepts of WWII, *Blitzkrieg*.<sup>230</sup>

The fundamental message, therefore, as Professor Stone observes in his forward to *The Art of War*, is that the commander should ‘try and overcome the enemy by wisdom, not by force alone’.<sup>231</sup> As Clausewitz further observes; ‘any complex activity, if it is to be carried on with any degree of virtuosity, calls for appropriate gifts of intellect and temperament. If they are outstanding and reveal themselves in exceptional achievements, their possessor is called a “genius”’.<sup>232</sup> Even the British playwright William Shakespeare, not a man renowned for his military prowess, realises that his Richard III would have the military sense to reconnoitre the battlefield before he fought on it, utilising his wisdom before he used his force.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion we may see that military command functions within a highly structured, and sometimes constraining, well established and often difficult to alter, system. Within this complex system, however, the one constant is the hierarchy of command, which is

---

<sup>229</sup> Ian V. Hogg, *Armour in Conflict* (London: Jane’s Publishing Company, 1980) p. 55.

<sup>230</sup> Biddle, p. 18.

<sup>231</sup> Sun Tzu: Stone, *The Art of War*, p. 7.

<sup>232</sup> Clausewitz, p.100.



standardised, more-or-less, throughout most of the world's military establishments. The quality of the commanders within the system, however, varies and often dictates to a large extent how successful military units created by the system will be when tested in battle. The competent commanders, and hopefully "Military Genius", who will emerge from the ranks of the many commanders produced by the system, are recognised by a distinct set of personal traits and abilities that are readily discernable and have long been established.

The competent commander will train the forces under his command with sincerity, benevolence, and strictness; he appreciates the need to have a clear understanding of his strategic objectives. He issues his orders based on wisdom, understands the benefits and dangers of new technology and leads his men with courage and tenacity. He will have a keen sense of the value of his subordinate commander's worth and will choose them wisely. His recognition of the political, industrial and economic circumstances under which he is sent to war will be clear in his mind and well understood.

When a commander, imbued with the qualities and traits set out above, deploys the forces under his command, whatever their size or task, his troops, evidence discovered for this work suggests, will inevitably perform more efficiently and achieve more on the battlefield. Conversely a force with an inefficient commander, issued with an ill-defined military task or objective, badly trained, poorly motivated, out of step with the overall military strategy and ignorant of new technology will, evidence also suggests, invariably attain poor results on the battlefield.

However, the system is by no means infallible and in the case of long periods of peace, for example, it may be impossible to establish which generals, if any, may or may not be competent commanders or have potential "Military Genius". In such circumstances, it has to be conceded, that military ability in real war situations can, perhaps, never be accurately established before hostilities begin.

The above being said it must also be accepted that armies do not need exceptional generals or even “Generals of Genius” to succeed in their given tasks. The British Navy had had many victories before Nelson appeared and they would have many more after his death. What those who aspire to produce capable commanders need are systems which enable exceptional commanders to emerge if they exist but which also consistently produce capable, informed and competent commanders in war and in peace. As Stone says in his forward to the *Art of War*: ‘Sun Tzu had the rules of war worked out even before Alexander the Great and that therefore reading Sun would have saved many subsequent commanders from absurd misjudgements’.<sup>233</sup> As we shall see in the following chapters of this work Stone’s thoughts should be noted and the words “absurd misjudgements” seen as a recurring, and yet perhaps avoidable, theme.

## CHAPTER 1

*Sun-Tzu wrote that; ‘warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Way (Tao) to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed’.*<sup>234</sup>

In an effort to follow Sun-Tzu’s advice this part of the work will seek to ponder how the Battle of Mersa el Brega came to be fought and analyze some of the significant aspects which ultimately led to the battle being lost. The chapter will commence with a review of Britain’s pre-war position in the Middle East. This will be followed by an examination of the resources Britain had in the region in the run up to WWII. The career and subsequent arrival in the Middle East of General Wavell will be reviewed. Wavell’s contribution to the build up of his base services will be scrutinised and significant aspects of the results will be chronicled. The review of the base organisation will include an examination of fuel, transport, food and military resources.

### BRITAIN’S POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA

Prior to World War I the British Empire held sway over a multitude of states and territories in the Middle East and Africa. In the Middle East, along the Red Sea coast

---

<sup>233</sup> Sun Tzu: Stone, *The Art of War*, p. 7.

<sup>234</sup> *ibid*, p.167.

and in the Mediterranean, Britain controlled Aden, Egypt, the Sudan, Cyprus, Northern Somalia, The Trucial States as well as Muscat, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar.<sup>235</sup> At the conclusion of World War I British possessions in the region became even greater. As the British, French and Italian Empires, were the Victor Powers in the war they divided most of the remaining states and territories of North Africa, East Africa and the Middle East between themselves. 'Where Coer de Lion had failed, General Allenby had succeeded: Jerusalem, Damascus and Baghdad were in British hands, and it had become possible for visionaries like T. E. Lawrence to dream of a new 'brown dominion' in lands soon to reveal a fantastic wealth in oil'.<sup>236</sup> Through negotiations at Versailles each of the Victor Powers took a varying share of the spoils of war. 'As a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between the British and the French, the Turkish Empire south of Anatolia was shared out between the British, French and friendly Arabs'.<sup>237</sup>

The Italians, although not part of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, retained Libya and certain territories in East Africa such as Italian Somaliland and Eritrea. The French gained control over various parts of North Africa part of Morocco, the whole of Algeria and Tunisia. In the Middle East the French acquired Syria and the Lebanon. In virtually all of the remainder of the Middle East the British took control. 'By allying with the Turks, the Germans had made the Middle East a theatre of war. The result had been to hand the Middle East to Britain'.<sup>238</sup>

To give legitimacy to their occupation of the new territories, and save money, the British and French Governments establish a system of rule known as the mandate system.<sup>239</sup> Under this system the two Governments maintained control over the various states in the region through the use of puppet governments which they set up and

---

<sup>235</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2004) pp. 315/316.

<sup>236</sup> Edward Grierson, *The Imperial Dream: British Commonwealth and Empire 1775-1969* (London: Collins, 1972) p.170.

<sup>237</sup> Tony Howarth, *Twentieth Century History* (Harlow: Longman Group, 1979) p. 49.

<sup>238</sup> Ferguson, p. 316.

<sup>239</sup> Grierson, p.174.

directed. The British created mandates for themselves in Palestine, Trans Jordan and Iraq. Furthermore, 'the mandate system allowed Britain to take over German East Africa (Tanganyika, now part of Tanzania) and parts of Togoland and the Cameroons'.<sup>240</sup> Moreover, British influence was growing in Persia (modern day Iran) over the ruling Pahlavi monarchy. The British had acquired a majority shareholding in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later to become British Petroleum) this gave them both influence and leverage in this strategically important oil producing country.

At the start of the Second World War therefore Britain and France controlled most of North Africa, East Africa and the Middle East and by extension virtually all of the vital resources in the region, the most important being oil.<sup>241</sup> The Italians on the other hand 'had succeeded in attaining the overseas colonies they had sought since the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. Italian East Africa dominated the Horn of Africa, dwarfing and virtually surrounding British Somaliland and thus dominating much of the southern shore of the Red Sea and access to the Suez Canal'.<sup>242</sup> Thus although the Italian presence in the region was not at this time particularly threatening they nonetheless could, in theory, if they wished, challenge British and French use of the Suez Cannel from their Red Sea bases.

## **A TENUOUS GRIP**

Although the British held vast amounts of territory in Africa and the Middle East their military presence in the region was pre WWII, and for some time after hostilities broke out on 3 September 1939, not very strong. There were several reasons for the British Government's military weakness in this vital region. The lack of financial resources in the late twenties and early thirties due to the world economic crash of 1929 which caused mass unemployment was one inhibiting factor. 'Between 1921 and 1938, at least

---

<sup>240</sup> Norman Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997) p. 36.

<sup>241</sup> Dighton, p. 499.

<sup>242</sup> Buckingham, p. 26.

one out of every ten British citizens of working age was without a job. In the worst of those years one out of every five was out of work'.<sup>243</sup> Another reason for the lack of money to finance rearmament was the need to spend what money there was on social needs at home such as health, housing and education.<sup>244</sup> These pressing social needs inclined successive governments to leave all Britain's military forces under resourced. Between 1919 and 1932, for example, the Army had its budgets reduced every year despite a huge raise in its commitments. Furthermore, pay cuts, prompted by a £5 million cut in the Royal Navy's budget in 1931, sparked a mutiny in the Atlantic fleet at Invergordon.<sup>245</sup> This consequently meant that from virtually the end of WWI until the early 1930s, overseas commands, such as those in the Middle East and East Africa, were invariably maintained and garrisoned at the absolute minimum level.

However, in October 1933, when the League of Nations rejected Hitler's ultimatum that Germany would only consider disarmament within the wider context of general disarmament, Hitler withdrew Germany from the League and its rearmament constraints. In March 1935, Hitler went further and denounced the Versailles clauses which restricted the size of the Germany's army and introduced conscription.<sup>246</sup>

This last action on the part of Hitler finally prompted the British Government to react. In March 1935, the Government published a White Paper entitled "The Statement Relating to Defence" which admitted; 'that the situation was approaching a point where we are not possessed of the necessary means of defending ourselves against an aggressor'.<sup>247</sup> This report prompted both the British Government and their French counterparts to seriously review their military preparedness. The policy of appeasement

---

<sup>243</sup> Howarth, p. 100.

<sup>244</sup> Peter Lane, *The Labour Party* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1973) p.59.

<sup>245</sup> Buckingham, p. 60.

<sup>246</sup> John Martell, *The Twentieth Century World: Third Edition* (London: Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1980) p. 105.

<sup>247</sup> British Government White Paper, *The Statement Relating to Defence*, Published by HMG London 4 March 1935.

towards the dictatorships of Italy and Germany, which had hitherto been seen as a way of avoiding conflict, was increasingly being recognised as no guarantee against war.

Therefore, 'despite the policy of appeasement Britain and France embarked upon a gradual programme of rearmament from the mid-thirties, which became more and more frenetic as they realised just how far behind Germany they had allowed themselves to drift'.<sup>248</sup> The British were, in fact, lagging behind Germany in virtually all aspects of military preparedness and in no area more so than in the production of modern aircraft. The realisation of just how far behind they were in the production of modern fighter aircraft, prompted the British Air Ministry, in 1935, to give approval to the aircraft builder Supermarine to produce a prototype of a highly advanced and extremely costly fighter to be known as the Spitfire.<sup>249</sup>

With the commitment to rearm established the next problem was where the threat would be most likely to come from. With only limited resources available difficult and often hard choices had to be made. Should, for example, the British rearm to defend against the potential threat coming from Hitler in Europe or from Mussolini in Africa. Initially, at least, it looked as though the most immediate threat would come from Hitler.

However, in October 1936, the Rome-Berlin Axis was announced thus bringing Italy into the frame as a potential enemy. Now with two possible enemies and with scarcely enough military resources to confront one, the British had to decide where the most immediate threat lay. Would any belligerent moves come first from Germany or Italy? Although both threats loomed large it was felt that Italy at this time was the more immediate threat. The Italians were soon to launch two new fifteen inch gun battleships

---

<sup>248</sup> George Forty & John Duncan, *The Fall of France: Disaster in the West 1939-40* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990) p. 14.

<sup>249</sup> William Green, *War Planes of the Second World War: Volume 2* (London: Macdonald & Co, 1961) p. 92. 'Within two months of the prototypes maiden flight, on June 3, 1936, a contract for 310 Spitfire 1s had been awarded to Supermarine, this being supplemented by a contract for a further 200 machines in the following year.'

the *Vittorio Veneto*, July 1937, and *Littorio* August 1937 and three more were planned. Therefore, in response to the growing belligerence coming from Rome and the increasing power of the Italian Navy in the Mediterranean the British felt that their position in the Middle East was the most threatened. Consequently, in an effort to make their Middle Eastern possessions more secure, in April 1937, the British decided to make Alexandria on the Eastern Mediterranean coast a main fleet base and stationed battleships there.

The debate over who was the greatest threat was, however, by no means over and the emphasis change frequently between both dictators. On 5 July 1937, at the 296<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Prime Minister Chamberlain stated that; ‘we need not be afraid of attack by Italy, either in the Mediterranean or elsewhere, unless she is sure of German support. If Germany was contemplating hostile action or became engaged in hostilities against us, there was little doubt that Italy would join in and take the opportunity to fish in troubled waters’.<sup>250</sup> This statement seemed, at least temporally, to rule Italy out as an aggressor. However, towards the end of 1937 this certainty was removed and Italy was again confirmed as the most immediate threat to British interests. In December 1937, at a meeting of the Imperial General Staff the question was posed where was the Army most likely to fight? The answer was that now the Middle East was the danger spot.<sup>251</sup>

Although a war in Europe with Germany and her allies could not be ruled out and was, in fact, becoming increasingly more likely, if Italy gained control of the Suez Canal and Middle Eastern oil then Britain’s ability to fight any war, without these vital strategic possessions, would be very difficult. A fact recognised by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Duff Cooper, who declared that; ‘the Suez Canal was one of the most vital

---

<sup>250</sup> Taken from the minutes of the meeting of the 296<sup>th</sup> Committee of Imperial Defence, *Documents on Foreign Policy*, Series 2, Volume xix, no 15, pp 22-30.

<sup>251</sup> David Fletcher, *The Great Tank Scandal* (London: HMSO Books, 1989) p. 70.

and vulnerable points in the Empire'.<sup>252</sup> A sentiment shared by Strawson who wrote; 'conquer Egypt, get control of the whole North African coast and Middle Eastern oil, strike a blow at British sea power, which enabled Britain to preserve a degree of initiative, and how would she be able to conduct offensive operations'.<sup>253</sup> Britain's strategic interests in the Middle East, possession of the Suez Canal and access to almost unlimited and cheap Middle Eastern oil, could only be preserved by strong defensive arrangements in the region.

The need to reinforce their forces in the Middle East was further confirmed in British minds by Italy's withdrawal from international organisations such as the League of Nations which Italy left at the end of 1937. The Italian withdrawal from the League alarmed the British Government to such an extent that they almost immediately began to rearm their Middle East air force and to strengthen their army units in the region. This 1937 commitment from the British War Office to try and adequately defend the Middle East was, however, less than cast iron. The level of commitment would, in fact, fluctuate throughout the late 1930s. Indeed it was the *Anschluss*,<sup>254</sup> the enforced union of Austria with Germany on 12 March 1938 that finally shocked many out of their complacency.

Thus late in the day the British Government began to take the defence of the Middle East seriously. The 1935 White Paper and the 1937 impetus caused by Italy's withdrawal from the League of Nations had started a trickle of war materials flowing into the Middle East. Now, with the *Anschluss* and the German takeover of Czechoslovakia, the amount of equipment being sent to the Middle East to arm the war machine turned into a steady stream, eventually, as we shall see, it would become a

---

<sup>252</sup> D. R. Thorp, *Eden* (London: Pimlico, 2004) p. 225.

<sup>253</sup> Strawson, *The Battle for North Africa*

<sup>254</sup> Stuart T. Miller, *Mastering Modern European History* (London: Macmillan, 1990) p. 445.



flood.<sup>255</sup> Moreover, as the war machine needs a driver the British also sent a new Commander-in-Chief.

### **GENERAL WAVELL: SCHOLAR AND SOLDIER?**

*The general is the supporting pillar of state. If his talents are all-encompassing, the state will invariably be strong. If the supporting pillar is marked by fissures, the state will invariably grow weak.* Sun-Tzu<sup>256</sup>

On 6 July, 1939, George Giffard the 'Military Secretary at the War Office wrote to General Archibald Percival Wavell and asked him whether he would like to be considered for the appointment of General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East'.<sup>257</sup> Wavell, not long back from Palestine, and with a reasonable knowledge of the area anyway from his service in the Middle East in the previous war, considered himself well qualified for the job. Furthermore, 'by sheer fact of distance, it was bound to give him a degree of independence of command, which he always wanted and which (if he stopped at Salisbury) as a Corps Commander in the B.E.F. he might never attain'.<sup>258</sup> Without much hesitation Wavell accepted the C.I.G.S. invitation, was appointed, and sailed for the Middle East on 27 July 1939.

### **G.O.C. MIDDLE EAST 1939**

Wavell's appointment was not, however, universally welcomed. It was perhaps regrettable for future British fortunes in the coming war that those with suspicions about Wavell's ability to command at the highest level, such as Liddell Hart, did not voice their concerns at the time. Hart felt; 'that both Wavell and Dill had passed their peak by having to wait too long for opportunity'.<sup>259</sup> However, individuals like Hart may have had at least a partial defence for their inaction. Wavell, right up to the point of his

---

<sup>255</sup> Thorp, p. 221.

<sup>256</sup> Sun Tzu: Stone, *The Art of War*, p. 178.

<sup>257</sup> Connell, p. 205.

<sup>258</sup> *ibid*

<sup>259</sup> Schofield, p. 121.

departure, was presenting well-reasoned and convincing reports, on how he was going to tackle his new role in the Middle East, to anyone with the clearance to read them.

On 31 July, before taking up his appointment as G.O.C. Middle East, Wavell set out in a short report his views on the problems his new command would present him. He wrote prophetically: 'The last war was won in the West...The next war will be won or lost in the Mediterranean; and the longer it takes us to secure effective control of the Mediterranean, the harder will be the winning of the war'.<sup>260</sup> The key phrase here as far as this work is concerned, must be "effective control of the Mediterranean" which could only be achieved by gaining, and keeping, control of the whole of the North African coastline. To succeed in this endeavour Wavell continued; 'the task of the staff of the Middle East Command is therefore to plan, in conjunction with the other services, not merely the defence of Egypt and our other interests in the Middle East but such measures of offence as will enable us and our Allies to dominate the Mediterranean at the earliest possible moment'.<sup>261</sup>

It is, perhaps, a pity Wavell did not take his own advice or even that offered by Clausewitz, who suggests that; 'as soon as difficulties arise – and that must always happen when great results are at stake – then things no longer move on of themselves like a well oiled machine, the machine itself then begins to offer resistance, and to overcome this the commander must have a great force of will'.<sup>262</sup> To gain "effective control of the Mediterranean" and overcome the many problems he would find in his new command, Wavell would certainly need to have "a great force of will". On 2 August 1939, just a month before the outbreak of war with Germany, the new master of the machine, Wavell, took up his appointment in Cairo.

---

<sup>260</sup> George Forty, *The First Victory: General O'Connor's Desert Triumph Dec 1940 – Feb 1941* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990) p. 21

<sup>261</sup> *ibid*

<sup>262</sup> Clausewitz, p. 41.

## A BASE IS BORN

In order for any meaningful military operations to be carried out in the Middle East, or indeed in any theatre of military operation, a well organised base needs to be established. Consequently this section of the work will seek to clarify how the huge base organisation which eventually developed in the Middle East was established and which individuals and organisations were primarily responsible for its creation.

It would be fair to say that some authors, perhaps most authors, who have reviewed the establishment of the vital base organisation in the Middle East, have concluded that it was primarily Wavell's initiative and drive, after his arrival in August 1939, which placed Middle East Command on to such a sure war footing. Woollcombe, for example, writing in 1959, had this to say about Wavell's contribution to the setting up of the base organisation in the Middle East.

‘Within these wide and famous zones [Middle East Command] the military power of the Empire was to be raised on Wavell's shoulders, and the foundations laid of the great Egyptian base. All the basic necessities of life which western mankind must take to war, the facilities for their reception, installation, maintenance or on-flow, together, with food and water and communications, and warlike elementals of ammunition, fuel, weapons and workshops, had to be largely superimposed on arid lands. And in this undertaking, besides provisions for its self, many utility services and stores, and all transportation, had to be provided by the Army for the Air Force.’<sup>263</sup>

So according to Woollcombe, and we could add Raugh,<sup>264</sup> Connell<sup>265</sup> and many others to this list, it was Wavell who laid the foundations of the great Egyptian military base. However, when this claim is examined in detail there seems to be little evidence to support this conclusion.

Work, in fact, started in earnest to construct the great military base which eventually rose out of the desert sand in Egypt, three years before Wavell arrived in the Middle East. In 1936 the Egyptian and British Governments signed a treaty in which ‘the Egyptian Government undertook to build certain roads and bridges for defence purposes

---

<sup>263</sup> Woollcombe, p. 14.

<sup>264</sup> Raugh, p. 66.

<sup>265</sup> Connell, p. 222.

and to replace dirt roads through the Delta and desert tracks'.<sup>266</sup> This road improvement scheme, as we shall see, turned out to be the first of a whole series of schemes designed to improve the fighting ability of Middle East Command. These improvements included new airfields, stores depots, fuel storage facilities and a huge expansion in the amount of transport units and their servicing facilities.

## **FUEL**

The need to supply vast amounts of fuel to army and air force units was an obvious requirement should hostilities breakout. However, pre-war, there were many shortcomings in the existing fuel supply set up in the Middle East. To remedy the problem an unusual partnership was formed in January 1939 between the Army and RAF who jointly funded a bulk fuel storage project called the Jebel Dave scheme. 'This scheme entailed the construction of buried storage to hold six months' reserves should the Suez Refinery be put out of action'.<sup>267</sup> To fill the tanks a tanker berth was built on the Great Bitter Lake and a pipeline installed connecting the oil terminal with the new tanks at Geneifa near the infantry support base on the Sweetwater Canal, approximately 80 miles east of Cairo. Thus the initial lack of tankage for the reception of bulk stocks of fuel was satisfied by the completion of the Jebel Dave scheme during 1940.

## **TRANSPORT**

In regard to the provision of lorry borne transport and general transport company's great improvements were made in the period before Wavell arrived in the Middle East. In the late 1930s transport deficiencies in Middle East Command were identified as a major problem and initiatives to improve the amount, quality and serviceability of vehicles were doggedly pursued by the RASC.

---

<sup>266</sup> Wilson, p. 19.

<sup>267</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p.101.

At the start of 1939 the RASC, which had responsibility for providing motor transport and general supplies to the forces in the Middle East, had only 'a dozen MT companies in Egypt and Palestine, most having the standard establishment of 24 vehicles'.<sup>268</sup> There was only one MT Company, No 39, stationed at Abbassia on the outskirts of Cairo, with Vehicle reception, MT stores, and repair shop facilities which served both Egypt and Palestine. 'On the supply side, there were four small depots in Egypt and Palestine, and each contained a reserve of two months supplies'.<sup>269</sup>

This level of transport companies and reserve of supplies, approximately 300 3 ton trucks and 60 days worth of supplies, was quickly recognised as being inadequate to service the vehicle needs or sustained supply requirements of even 7AD once hostilities began. Consequently the RASC set in motion a huge expansion of Motor Maintenance (MM) companies, Vehicle Supply (VS) companies, Motor Transport (MT) companies and General Transport (GT) companies.

However, even with these new arrangements in place it was recognised that there would still be a problem resupplying units, with both replacement drivers and vehicles, once they were in the field. Consequently, in June 1940, HQ Cairo asked for the formation of a Vehicle Reserve Depot (VRD) to be set up in the Western Desert. Unfortunately, although the establishment of a VRD was agreed in principle in November 1940 it was not actually established until well after Operation *Compass* had finished in February 1941.<sup>270</sup>

Therefore, and this should be borne in mind when we reach the main narrative, as the inevitable wastage of vehicles increased as Operation *Compass* progressed, the absence of a VRD restricted the prompt use of captured vehicles as there was no base organisation from which drivers could be sent forward to utilise captures. As operations

---

<sup>268</sup> *ibid*

<sup>269</sup> *ibid*

<sup>270</sup> WO 216/60, Lessons of operations in the Western Desert report by Major-General Gambier Parry, Para H.

continued and the supply situation worsened drivers, who could have been formed into a VRD before operations started, were eventually found and sent forward to take over some of the captures. This resulted in three, very useful, 10 ton lorry companies, each comprising of approximately 65 captured vehicles, being established. One company came into operation on 19 December and the other two on 25 December 1940. In the later stages of the campaign these new transport companies greatly eased the supply situation.<sup>271</sup>

Therefore, we may conclude that although there were great improvements in the provision of transport and an increase in the amount of transport companies these improvements had been initiated prior to Wavell's arrival. Moreover, after Wavell's arrival he failed to order the establishment of a VRD. Consequently, it is not difficult to argue, that far from improving the transport situation after he arrived; Wavell's presence actually hampered improvements.

## **HOBART ARRIVES**

Nor can Wavell claim any credit for the establishment of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division (7AD) without which operations in the western desert would have been virtually impossible. The origins of what would become 7AD can be traced back to the early 1930s when General Percy Hobart (Hobo) became commander of 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade (1 TB). 'In 1933 he became Inspector Royal Tank Corps, and after promotion to Brigadier the following year formed and commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade, the first armoured formation of that size in the British Army'.<sup>272</sup> In 1938 Hobo was sent to Egypt where he arrived on 27<sup>th</sup> September.

Hobo quickly gathered together the scattered units he had been given and pushed them out into the desert to train both day and night. The forces at his disposal were in

---

<sup>271</sup> *ibid*

<sup>272</sup> Buckingham, p. 64.

the main accustomed to garrison duties and found their new commander a stern taskmaster much as the men of the U.S. 88<sup>th</sup> Division would later in the war. However, despite their initial resistance to his methods Hobo soon infused his men ‘with the same magic morale he had given to the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade, and month by month he welded the scattered units into a determined, smoothly functioning fighting division’.<sup>273</sup>

So good, in fact, did Hobo’s 7 AD become that O’Connor, ‘called the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division “the best trained division I have ever seen’.” The 7<sup>th</sup> was highly trained, and ‘General Hobart had imbued them with that most valuable of all qualities, confidence in their comrades and in their own abilities’.<sup>274</sup>

## WILSON ARRIVES

By early 1939 the promise of peace in our time brought home by Chamberlain<sup>275</sup> looked to be increasingly unlikely. Therefore, in February 1939, the Chiefs-of-Staff contacted their French opposite numbers and advised them that plans should be drawn up:

On the basis of war against Germany and Italy in combination – possibly joined by Japan – and the scope should include all likely fields of operations, especially the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Military Planning for what was to become the ‘Battle for North Africa’ started with this directive’.<sup>276</sup>

In an effort to comply with the ambitions of this directive the British Government sent a new commander to the Middle East. In June 1939, Lieutenant-General H. Maitland Wilson arrived in Egypt. Pitt described Wilson as ‘a soldier of wide experience, and calm and placid appearance’.<sup>277</sup> Michael Dewar in *Churchill’s Generals* had this to say about Wilson; ‘more than anything else, Jumbo Wilson got

---

<sup>273</sup> Constable, p. 2.

<sup>274</sup> Verney, pp. 18/19.

<sup>275</sup> Howarth, p. 168.

<sup>276</sup> Jackson,, p. 5.

<sup>277</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 6.

things done – nothing was too difficult – and he was not afraid to speak his mind’.<sup>278</sup>

Wilson’s instructions from the War Office; and it must be stressed here that these instructions came from the War Office in London not from Wavell, were to make ‘an examination of the potential defences of the area under his command, and to do what was necessary to build them up’.<sup>279</sup>

His task was it has to be said enormous. Although many of the requirements needed to make Egypt a military base had, as we have seen, already been started many projects, such as the new roads and the fuel storage faculties, were still incomplete. There was still little suitable accommodation for troops and few training or administrative facilities. There were few ammunition dumps and even fewer artillery parks. There was still little in the way of transport to bring the infantry to the front and even less to sustain it while it was there, although, as mentioned, some improvements in the provision of transport had already been put in hand. Moreover, there was hardly any manpower or expertise to remedy all these and many other defects. There existed in Egypt only a peacetime establishment of personnel for both the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) and the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) until some months after the declaration of war. However, Wilson, utilising the manpower available set about finding solutions to remedy to some degree all of these problems.

Although detailed planning for expansion was hampered by constant changes in War Office policy for the defence of the Middle East, this perversely helped Wilson in his quest to establish an adequate, and eventually excellent, base organisation in Egypt. The War Office plan, set out in October 1939, called for a base organisation capable of supporting 15 Divisions with a manpower allocation of approximately 300,000 personnel and a reserve of supplies for 150 days. This plan was to change and grow several times in the next twelve months. By November 1940, for example, the War

---

<sup>278</sup> John Keegan, Michael Dewar found in *Churchill’s Generals* by, London: Cassell, 2005) p. 167.

<sup>279</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, pp. 6/7



Office plan had expanded to the extent that they now wanted 23 Divisions available in the Middle East by March 1942.<sup>280</sup>

23 Divisions for the Middle East was, however, a completely unrealistic ambition for the period, as there were nowhere near that amount of formed divisions in the whole British order of battle. Nor were there enough trained men to fill the ranks of 23 Divisions even if they had existed, even on paper. In 1939 ‘besides her small but high quality regular army, Britain was just in the process of forming and equipping a Territorial field army of twenty–six divisions, and at the outbreak of war the Government had made plans for expanding the total to fifty-five divisions. But the first contingent of this new force would not be ready to enter the field until 1940’.<sup>281</sup>

The actual amount of divisions in Middle East Command by the end of 1940, even if the incomplete ones forming in Palestine and East Africa are counted, was nearer to 8 than 23. However, although the War Office commitments were unrealistic, the over estimate provided the impetus for a massive reinforcement programme for the Middle East. As these new forces arrived Wilson incorporated them into the various divisions forming in Egypt thus eventually increasing their fighting capacity enormously.

Moreover, while all this base work was going on Wilson was not idle on the political front. The Egyptian authorities were not committed to fully supporting the British cause and although not hostile in the main to the British war effort they refused to declare war on Britain’s enemies. The Egyptians wanted to see which way the war would go and therefore decided to sit on the fence. The Egyptians were not inclined to become an active ally of the British but they were, because of Wilson’s efforts and his powers of diplomacy, willing to cooperate with them. This enabled Wilson to press ahead with many of the vital projects listed above.<sup>282</sup> As Lewin says; ‘Wilson reached

---

<sup>280</sup> Fernyhough, p. 110.

<sup>281</sup> Liddell-Hart, p 18.

<sup>282</sup> Dewar, p. 167.

the rank of Field Marshal for reasons which are difficult to identify and have never been explained. Perhaps the very absence of originality or scintillation enabled him to float upwards unimpeded. But in 1940, at least, his recognised qualities as a trainer of troops and as an organiser were strong and evident'.<sup>283</sup> It is difficult to argue against this assessment.

It should also be added that Wilson was ably assisted by both the RASC and the RAOC. These two organisations had, from early 1939 onwards, begun with some degree of success to tackle the many maintenance and supply problems associated with the various War Office directives. It was indeed the officers commanding these two organisations who realised that the deficiencies in equipment and manpower in the Middle East were unlikely to be satisfied wholly from UK sources.<sup>284</sup> Therefore, they set in train a programme of trying to obtain local supplies of virtually everything the Army might need. Self-sufficiency soon became the order of the day. The self-sufficient character of Middle East Command also extended to programmes of instruction and military schools were established to instruct men in almost every aspect of military activity.<sup>285</sup>

The early start on projects such as the road improvement plan, the Jebel Dave fuel storage scheme and the expansion of transport companies made movement and sustained fighting in the desert possible. The arrival of Wilson in the Middle East, bringing as he did his resolute and competent approach to solving the many equipment, supply, accommodation and transport problems that the army and air force had was indeed fortuitous for the British. This enabled them to build up substantial numbers of well equipped, well trained and mobile forces in the region.

---

<sup>283</sup> Lewin, p. 57.

<sup>284</sup> Fernyhough, p. 114.

<sup>285</sup> Raugh, p. 51. These included Intelligence, Air Force Liaison Officer, Signal, Weapon Training, Tactics, Motor Mechanics, and Motor Transport Drivers' Courses, plus the Middle East Staff College and Middle East Cookery School'

The efforts of both the RASC and the RAOC cannot be praised highly enough. Their rapid introduction of the policy of trying to source as much food and equipment locally was absolutely vital and saved vast amounts of war making materials being shipped to the Middle East. Hobo's drive and determination to create an armoured division was to bring lasting benefits to the desert army. Also in this regard, when more substantial reinforcements reached the Middle East, it is thanks largely to Wilson's organisational efforts that they were able to be made battle worthy quickly. Thus it can be said with some degree of confidence that well before Wavell's arrival in the Middle East much of the work to make Middle East Command a viable military entity was either completed or in course of completion.

## **PLANS FOR ATTACK**

Nonetheless, even though Wavell played little part in preparing Middle East command for war he did at least set in motion plans to take it to war. Working, perhaps, on the old military maxim that attack is the best form of defence Wavell ordered plans to be drawn up for an attack on his potential enemy. As Barnett says; 'one of Wavell's first acts was to instruct General Wilson, General Officer Commanding British Troops in Egypt, to prepare plans for an invasion of Libya, with particular reference to the novel problem of supply in the desert'.<sup>286</sup> However, while Wilson was ordered to prepare plans for an attack on the Italians in Libya, should war breakout, it was still to be some considerable time before the resources to carryout any plan arrived in the Middle East. Nor, when the resources did arrive, would the actual plan utilised to defeat the Italians be either Wavell's or Wilson's.

In regard to military resources once war between Germany and Britain had been declared both the British and the Italians set in train a programme of substantial

---

<sup>286</sup> Barnett, p. 23.

reinforcement for their forces in North and East Africa.<sup>287</sup> However, initially both nations were hard pressed to find the men and equipment to full fill their respective ambitions in Africa. The British, for example, flew in aircraft, in penny packets, from Kenya, Iraq, and Palestine. Even so by September 1939, there were still only 90 front line bombers and 75 older fighter aircraft available in the Middle East.<sup>288</sup>

Although the British High Command wanted to send more resources to the Middle East they now considered Hitler to be the greater threat. Consequently they sent most of their army, air force and heavy weapons to France. The Italians at this stage simply did not have sufficient trained men or modern equipment ready in large enough quantities to send much to Africa. The Italian 'Foreign Minister, commenting on 24 August 1939, said that we are absolutely in no condition to wage war. The Italian Army is in a 'pitiful' state. On 1 September, the Italian Premier, Benito Mussolini, took up a position of non-belligerence, a status unrecognised in international law'.<sup>289</sup>

However, as the Italian Army was unable to take to the field of battle in Europe, through the excuse of Mussolini's declaration of non-belligerence, this had a beneficial effect on the amount of war materials that could be made available for Africa. As new war materials were produced and new combat units were raised they could be sent to Africa rather than be kept in Italy in anticipation of a European engagement. Consequently 'when Italy declared war on 10 June 1940 the approximate strength of Marshal Graziani's forces, from the Egyptian frontier westward into Tripolitania, were 250,000. The East African garrison under the Duke of Aosta was rather larger: some

---

<sup>287</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, for a complete timetable of Italian deployment and army units see pages 34 to 38. For British units see *Ibid* pages 44 to 60. Also for general British deployments see Jackson, p. 6.

<sup>288</sup> Ireland, p. 19.

<sup>289</sup> Raugh, pp. 47/48

300,000'.<sup>290</sup> The Italian Army in Africa was, therefore on paper at least, a formidable force of over half a million men by June 1940.

The British on the other hand, because of the sheer size of their possessions in Africa and their commitment to the European theatre, had not been able to find the men or materials to reinforce their forces in Africa and the Middle East on anything like such a lavish scale. As mentioned earlier Wavell's Middle East Command was enormous encompassing many countries and parts of two continents, an area one thousand seven hundred miles by two thousand miles.<sup>291</sup>

To defend this enormous area, Wavell, it would be fair to say, had on his arrival in Egypt a completely inadequate army and air force. He had only one fully formed armoured division, 7AD, and this unit was not fully equipped.<sup>292</sup> To support 7AD he had spread around his vast command; 'twenty one infantry battalions, two regiments of horsed cavalry, four regiments of artillery with sixty-four field guns, forty-eight anti-tank guns and eight anti-aircraft guns'.<sup>293</sup> Nor by the outbreak of war with Italy had the position improved significantly. By summer 1940 the British had in Egypt only 36,000 men, in Palestine there were a further 27,500. In East Africa, the situation was very similar to that in Palestine.<sup>294</sup> Thus when war was declared the Italians had an almost 10 to 1 advantage in both theatres.

The relative inferiority of British forces to Italian was, however, not as bad as the bald figures suggested. Most of the new Italian units raised were not fully motorised and in the vast distances to be covered in Africa only motorised units were of much value. Moreover, much of the Italian equipment was obsolete or of poor design, their tanks being particularly inferior to the tanks of most other nations. The British on the other

---

<sup>290</sup> Lewin, p. 30.

<sup>291</sup> Barnett, p. 22.

<sup>292</sup> *ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>293</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>294</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 22.

hand although ‘greatly outnumbered, were fully motorised and well equipped with tanks – the only significant motorised unit the Italians possessed was their brothel’.<sup>295</sup>

Britain’s military position in the region also benefited from the presence of French forces in neighbouring countries. The French had large troop concentrations in their possessions in both North Africa, and the Middle East, which potentially gave added weight to the British defence of the region. As Julian Jackson points out: ‘The French presence in Syria to the northeast and Morocco and Algeria in the west provided some comfort’.<sup>296</sup> In Tunisia the French also had substantial forces. Furthermore, both nations held large naval resources in the Mediterranean, which should, in theory, deter any enemy from making war like moves in the region.

Thus although Wavell’s army was not at this stage very large he was not, because of the large allied naval presence and the substantial French forces in the region, attacked by either Germany or Italy at the outbreak of the war in September 1939. The Germans were too busy crushing Poland and then working out how to get round the Maginot Line to bother with the Middle East.<sup>297</sup> The Italians, who did covert Egypt and other British possessions in the area, were content, mainly through lack of resources, for the time being at least, to see how things developed. Wavell was not attacked by the Italians, as mentioned, until September 1940 consequently this gave the British twelve precious months in which to reinforce the Middle East, as best they could, train their new forces, and most importantly, continue the improvement of their base facilities.

## **FRANCE FALLS ITALY ENTERS THE WAR**

At the start of summer 1940 the British position in the Middle East looked quite secure. The expansion of the base organisation, still under Wilson’s guidance,<sup>298</sup> was well

---

<sup>295</sup> McCarthy & Syron, p. 151.

<sup>296</sup> Fletcher, p. 70.

<sup>297</sup> Jackson, p. 30.

<sup>298</sup> Barnett, p. 23.

under way and reinforcements were arriving from many parts of the Empire. 'Cavalry came from the UK, a British infantry battalion from the Far East, a brigade from Australia and a brigade from New Zealand'.<sup>299</sup> The fledgling 7AD, although still incomplete, was becoming stronger by the day. Moreover, the large French army was comfortably ready and available to support the British if they were attacked. To back up all this land based military capacity Wavell could count on the services of the huge French and British Mediterranean fleets. However, the relatively secure situation in the Middle East was about to change drastically as events unfolded in France.

On 10 May, 1940, the Germans attacked France; within two weeks the French and British forces in northern France were surrounded and cut off from their comrades in the south.<sup>300</sup> Although attempts to break out and link up with the forces in the south were made these attempts proved to be unsuccessful. On 26 May General Hastings Ismay, Assistant Secretary to the War Cabinet informed General Edward Spears, the British liaison officer appointed to work directly with the French Government, that 'the attempt of the northern armies to break out to the south had been abandoned. It was to be an evacuation at Dunkirk'.<sup>301</sup> This decision started a headlong retreat towards the coast culminating in the B.E.F being humiliatingly thrown out of France. By 3 June the last British troops were successfully evacuated and British engagement in France was over.<sup>302</sup>

The defeat of the B.E.F. and its evacuation from mainland Europe had a stimulating effect on Wavell. Wavell had already written, on 22 May 1940, that in his opinion, Italy was on the brink and must soon take the plunge into war. 'Musso looks to me rather like a man who has climbed up to the top diving board at a swimming pool, taken of his dressing gown and thrown a chest to the people looking on. I think he must do

---

<sup>299</sup> Connell, p. 222.

<sup>300</sup> Alistair Horne, *To lose a Battle* (London; Papermac, 1990) pp. 540/541

<sup>301</sup> Max Egremont, *Under Two Flags* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997) p. 166.

<sup>302</sup> Horne, p. 633.

something; if he cannot make a graceful dive, he will have to jump in somehow; he can hardly put on his dressing-gown and walk down the stairs again'.<sup>303</sup>

Now with France looking as though she might be knocked out of the war Middle East Command appeared likely to be the next place to be attacked. This possibility presented Wavell with a problem. Although it had been nearly ten months since he had arrived in Egypt, Wavell had still not appointed an army commander to command the army Wilson had been so painstakingly building.

Fortunately, for Wavell, a talented commander happened to be available. 'Major-General R. N. O'Connor, who was then commanding the southern district of Palestine, received a signal, on the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1940, ordering him to report immediately to General Wilson'.<sup>304</sup> With the news of the German successes in France being received by Wavell at his HQ in Cairo every day, it seems that the prospect that his Middle East Command would soon be required to do more than just train and wait was finally dawning on him. Therefore, at almost the eleventh hour, Wavell had to hurriedly find a commander for his field army. He chose O'Connor, arguably one of the finest Generals of his generation.

General Richard O'Connor is described by Robert Lyman as "one of the brightest stars in the British firmament". 'An intelligent practical man who enjoyed an easy rapport with his men, O'Connor possessed the rare trait of being able to judge issues on the basis of rationality rather than orthodoxy'.<sup>305</sup> O'Connor's 'aide-de-camp (ADC) described him as vigorous and intense, and deeply serious. Behind the friendly façade lay an expression of grim determination – of vigilance'. He had an 'enquiring mind, and, important in 1940, he was able to work at speed. Rapid action, use of surprise as a weapon, coordination of air and land forces and the taking of risks were as prevalent in

---

<sup>303</sup> Connell, p. 229.

<sup>304</sup> Barnett, p. 19.

<sup>305</sup> Robert Lyman, *The Longest Siege: Tobruk the Battle that Saved North Africa* (London: Macmillan, 2009) p. 6.



his generalship as they were in those of his arch-nemesis, General Erwin Rommel'.<sup>306</sup> However, just when things were starting to look up for the desert army in Egypt events back home took a turn for the worst.

The evacuation of France by the B.E.F. prompted Mussolini to make his move. 'On 10 June Italy declared war on France and Britain. Mussolini made his motive for attacking when he did very clear: I can't just sit back and watch the fight. When the war is over and victory comes I shall be left empty-handed'.<sup>307</sup> On 22 June, 1940, the French capitulated to the Germans. The British had now lost their ally in both Europe and, most importantly for Wavell, in the Middle East. The cataclysmic fall of France changed the balance of power in the Middle East literally overnight.

### **WAVELL IS CALLED HOME**

With this catastrophic change in the balance of power in the Middle East the War Cabinet; in an effort to establish what Wavell needed<sup>308</sup> and what he could achieve with the resources he already had,<sup>309</sup> felt it necessary to bring Wavell home to the UK for talks. Churchill wanted Wavell to appraise him and the War Cabinet on the situation in the Middle East and explain what plans he had for improving Britain's position in the region if given extra resources. Churchill was to write: 'I felt an acute need of talking over the serious events impending in the Libyan Desert with General Wavell himself. I had not met this distinguished officer, on whom so much was resting'.<sup>310</sup>

It is perhaps relevant to note here that Wavell's ability to withstand a concerted enemy attack, or launch an offensive himself, was at this time decidedly limited even taking into account the vast improvements in his base organisation and the dispatch of more troops. In early August 1940 Wavell's 'Western Desert Force could marshal only

---

<sup>306</sup> *ibid*

<sup>307</sup> Forty & Duncan, p. 174.

<sup>308</sup> Lewin, p. 35.

<sup>309</sup> Schofield, p. 149.

<sup>310</sup> Connell, p. 254.

the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division with but 65 of its full compliment of 220 cruiser tanks (and these suffered from lack of spares parts and even lack of full armament) and 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, still short of one complete brigade and of much artillery'.<sup>311</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division would, in fact, not be able to field its third brigade until it reached the Sudan in February 1941.

Moreover, despite the long months of inactivity in his command Wavell had done virtually nothing to resolve some of the glaring deficiencies in his organisation and equipment. For example the issue of fuel cans was still unresolved, with no suitable replacement for the wasteful flimsy being even considered let alone brought into production.<sup>312</sup> There was also still no VRD and indeed the lack of a fully operational VRD would not appear in the Western Desert until Operation *Compass* had finished. In the aftermath of Operation *Compass* an investigation into the performance of 7AD was commissioned and the author of the report, Major General Gambier-Parry, of whom we shall hear more later, wrote that: 'It is considered that it would be dangerous to rely in future on such a windfall of captured vehicles for vital replacements, and that immediate steps should be taken to form an Advanced VRD'.<sup>313</sup> His recommendation would, unfortunately, not be fully implemented before the Germans attacked in March 1941.

In regard to military units although through Wilson's efforts many were desert acclimatised and most were well trained many of the twenty or so infantry battalions Wavell had were scattered all over the command and had not been brigaded. Thus their potential military value was considerably diminished. Indeed, it is perhaps worth mentioning here that although Wavell now had nearly thirty British infantry battalions, at least three reconnaissance regiments and elements of at least ten artillery regiments,

---

<sup>311</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 46.

<sup>312</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 111.

<sup>313</sup> *ibid*

enough British units, in fact, to make three wholly British divisions, there was not one fully formed British infantry division in the whole of Middle East Command.

Wavell arrived back in the UK on Thursday 8 August. Within hours of his arrival he was in his first meeting with Prime Minister Churchill. This first encounter and subsequent meetings did not, according to some of those present, go well.<sup>314</sup> The animosity between the two men was noticed and commented on by several of those who attended the meetings. Brigadier John Shearer, for example, who accompanied Wavell at many of the meetings with the P.M. had this to say about the first meeting between the P.M. and Wavell: 'I could feel the temperature rising between him [Wavell] and the P.M., whose interrogation seemed to me to become increasingly curt'.<sup>315</sup>

After further conversations between Wavell and the P.M. and other Cabinet members the relationship between the two men became even more strained. When Leo Amery the Secretary of State for India asked Wavell to repeat his appreciation of his Italian counter parts probable intentions in the Desert Wavell impatiently repeated his previous statement. 'Now the P.M. interjected, But, Commander-in-Chief, you said....' In a flash, General Wavell replied, I did not.' And the relations between these two magnificent men were, at that moment, irretrievably damaged'.<sup>316</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the animosity between the two men Churchill wanted to accommodate Wavell's needs as much as he possibly could. After several rounds of talks it was agreed that Wavell should receive, as soon as possible by special convoy, one light and one Cruiser tank battalions, one heavy tank battalion equipped with Matilda tanks, forty eight 25 pdr field guns, twenty light Bofors anti-aircraft guns and an assortment of Bren guns, anti-tank rifles and as much ammunition for them all as

---

<sup>314</sup> Woollcombe, p. 25.

<sup>315</sup> Lewin, p. 37.

<sup>316</sup> *ibid*, p. 37.

could be found before they sailed.<sup>317</sup> This was on top of the resources already earmarked for Wavell.

It had previously been agreed that from the end of August convoys from the United Kingdom would be sent to the Middle East in a six-weekly cycle. This meant that with the convoys from Australia and India an average of 1,000 men per day with a matching tonnage of equipment, vehicles and stores were arriving in the Middle East. This reinforcement would eventually complete the assembly of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division and other British divisions and enable the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Australian and 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Divisions to be brought up to fighting strength.<sup>318</sup>

By the end of 1940 Wavell would receive approximately 117,000 men and over 150 tanks.<sup>319</sup> However, although the dispatch of the special convoy, which was to be named *Apology*, had been agreed how to get it to the Middle East was now the subject of intense debate. Despite the fact that the British Navy and Air Force had dealt the Italian Navy several stinging blows in June and July it was still felt by the Navy and the Army that sending all this war material through the Mediterranean was too risky.<sup>320</sup>

Therefore, a decision had to be taken as to whether to send the supply and troop ships through the Mediterranean and risk the loss of valuable men and equipment to the Italian/German Navy/Air Force or take the longer safer route around Africa and up the Red Sea. If the former route were taken then the supplies could be in Egypt in a week and be available to contribute to the defence of the Middle East. If the latter route were chosen, then they might take up to eight weeks to arrive and be too late to help. In the end, however, the argument put forward by both the Army and Navy that the risk to the valuable and almost irreplaceable men and equipment was too great, won the day.<sup>321</sup>

---

<sup>317</sup> Connell, p. 259.

<sup>318</sup> Jackson, pp. 28/29.

<sup>319</sup> Woollcombe, p. 29.

<sup>320</sup> Connell, p. 261.

<sup>321</sup> Ireland, p. 39.

The special convoy would go the long way to the Middle East.<sup>322</sup> Wavell's tanks and weapons reached Egypt intact in October better late perhaps than never.

On 15 August, Wavell embarked on his return journey to Cairo. His mission, although successful from the point of view of gaining the supplies he needed, had been less successful with regard to his relationship with his political master Churchill. Without doubt Churchill still had serious concerns about Wavell's ability to command in the Middle East. Churchill was to write to Eden just before Wavell set off for Cairo that he did 'not feel in him [Wavell] that sense of mental vigour and resolve to overcome obstacles, which is indispensable in war. I find instead, tame acceptance of a variety of local circumstances in different theatres, which is leading to a lamentable lack of concentration upon the decisive point.'<sup>323</sup>

Nevertheless, despite Churchill's reservations about Wavell's military prowess he resolved, at least for the time being, to leave him in post. 'While not in full agreement with General Wavell's use of the resources at his disposal, I thought it best to leave him in command. I admired his fine qualities, and was impressed with the confidence so many people had in him'.<sup>324</sup> It has to be said that at this time there were already doubts about Wavell's ability to command, Liddell-Hart for example, but the people who had Churchill's ear at this time were primarily Dill and Eden and as Wavell was Dill's best friend and Eden was very close to Dill it is perhaps not surprising that both backed Wavell. Indeed, 'Eden's opinion of Wavell, as expressed to Churchill, was unequivocal: neither he nor Dill knew of any general officer in the British Army better qualified to fill this very difficult post [Middle East Command] at this critical time'.<sup>325</sup>

However, Churchill's willingness to give Wavell the benefit of the doubt, even with Eden's and Dill's endorsement, would be very short lived. Events about to unfold in

---

<sup>322</sup> Found in War Cabinet report No 228 of 15 August 1940, CAB 65/14

<sup>323</sup> Letter from Churchill to Eden 13 August 1940 found in PREM 3/293/17.

<sup>324</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War* Vol II, p. 425.

<sup>325</sup> Schofield, p.152.

British Somaliland would not only, once again, sour relations between the two men, but it would also lead to Wavell taking military decisions later which would seriously compromise operations in the Western Desert.

The problems for the British in East Africa, and more specifically in British Somaliland, stemmed from the French surrender. With the French out of the war there was a consequent reduction in friendly forces in East Africa. Without the threat of French intervention the Italian commander in East Africa, the Duke-of-Aosta, decided, somewhat erroneously, that occupying British Somaliland would improve his tactical dispositions. The British forces in British Somaliland in 1940 were, as the country had hardly any military value to the British, few in number. 'The British garrison there, under Brigadier A. R. Chater, consisted of only four African and Indian battalions, with a British battalion, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Black Watch, on the way'.<sup>326</sup>

As this force was nowhere near big enough to defend the country from attack by the Italians it was decided that if attacked in strength the British forces stationed in British Somaliland, after doing what they could to hurt the enemy, would be evacuated to save them and their equipment. They could then, perhaps, be used more profitably elsewhere. Consequently when the Italians did attack with an 'invading force comprised of twenty-six battalions provided with artillery and tanks' the British forces put up what resistance they could, inflicting over 2,000 casualties on the Italians for the loss of only 38 killed and 222 wounded, and then left.<sup>327</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Black Watch, Wavell's old regiment, was the last to leave. After fighting a rearguard action they were evacuated in HMAS Hobart.<sup>328</sup> The Chief Political Officer in East Africa, Major General Sir Philip Mitchell, felt that the cost of even this resistance was too high but was glad to see the bulk of the forces evacuated

---

<sup>326</sup> Liddell Hart, p. 124.

<sup>327</sup> Schofield, p. 153.

<sup>328</sup> *ibid*

successfully. On 17 August he wrote in his diary the British have evacuated Somaliland 'after losing a good many lives for – to my mind – no very good reason. However, if they get all the troops away and we get them back here so much to the good'.<sup>329</sup>

Initially the decision to evacuate the troops in British Somaliland was accepted by Churchill without much comment. Wavell fully expected, perhaps justifiably, that this would be the end of the matter. He could not have been more wrong. When Churchill received a full account of the British evacuation, and the light casualties suffered by the British forces, he became very annoyed. He felt that so few casualties out of a force of over four thousand indicated that the resistance had been poor and that therefore the officer in charge was guilty of not putting up a good fight. Churchill confided to Eden that: 'If this is the sort of resistance that is to be expected and pass muster in the Middle East we must expect further tame and timely withdrawals'.<sup>330</sup>

Churchill immediately fired off a cable to Wavell ordering him to suspend the officer in charge and to conduct a court of inquiry. Wavell was perhaps understandably upset by this charge of what amounted to cowardice against one of his officers and cabled back that he would not order an inquiry. Moreover, he added that a big butcher's bill was not evidence of good tactics. Dill told Wavell sometime later that 'this telegram and especially the last sentence roused Winston to greater anger than he had ever seen him in before'.<sup>331</sup>

The loss of British Somaliland, although of little military importance in 1940, and possibly of even less military importance in 1941, had caused Wavell to look inadequate in his political master's eyes. Moreover, it had in his words 'put a blot on my reputation'. Furthermore, and perhaps adding even more shame to the whole incident, the only British regiment involved in the fighting had been Wavell's very own

---

<sup>329</sup> Sir Philip Mitchell papers Rhodes House Library Oxford, Oxford University Diary entry for 17 August 1940

<sup>330</sup> Found in the Avon Papers, AP 20/8/123 University of Birmingham Library

<sup>331</sup> Raugh, p. 83.

beloved 2<sup>nd</sup> Black Watch. The need to erase this blot, therefore, set in train a thought process which would lead Wavell to undertake military operations which, as we shall see later, jeopardised and undermined Britain's whole position in the Middle East.

## **THE ITALIAN ATTACK**

The long anticipated Italian offensive against British forces in Egypt, when it finally came, was a rather half-hearted and hesitant affair.<sup>332</sup> 'On 13<sup>th</sup> September, five infantry divisions, short of motor transport and supported initially only by some 120 tanks, began moving towards the frontier'.<sup>333</sup> The British forward troops, as planned, fell back on to their defensive positions, which had been constructed around the railhead at Mersa Matruh.<sup>334</sup> Matruh was at the time a village made up of a collection of white walled houses surrounding a small harbour set in a copper-sulphate sea. Its military value stemmed from the fact that 'it was the terminus of the railway and the metalled road from Alexandria and now it became a base and a fortress'.<sup>335</sup>

The British plan was to draw the Italians further and further away from their supply dumps until they reached Matruh where the British would make a stand behind their pre prepared defences. The Italian Foreign Minister Ciano immediately realised that the army in Libya might soon be in trouble. On 14 September he wrote 'at the moment the British are withdrawing without fighting. They wish to draw us away from our base, stretching our lines of communication'.<sup>336</sup> Ciano's assessment of British intentions was correct and would soon prove fatal to Italian aspirations in Egypt.

The Italians, however, did not reach Matruh. The Italian commander 'Graziani halted his exhausted columns sixty-five miles inside Egypt at the fishing village of Sidi

---

<sup>332</sup> Jackson, p. 21.

<sup>333</sup> Fraser, p. 118.

<sup>334</sup> Schofield, p. 154.

<sup>335</sup> Barnett, p 23.

<sup>336</sup> Lyman, p. 27.



Barrani on 16 September'.<sup>337</sup> With the occupation of Sidi Barrani complete Rome radio proclaimed Graziani's victorious advance and claimed that all is quiet and the trams are again running in the town of Sidi Barrani<sup>338</sup> which was strange as Sidi Barrani had no trams. The advance had so far cost the Italians '120 dead and 410 wounded. The British had lost a mere forty men. During the entire period since war had been declared Graziani's casualties numbered 3,500 to 150 British'.<sup>339</sup> Moreover, Italian moral had been severally shaken.<sup>340</sup>

This disparity in casualty figures also proved beyond a doubt the vulnerability and ineffectiveness of the Italian forces and the military superiority of the British. With regard to tactics and equipment, the British forces, on land in the air and at sea (the sinking of so many Italian warships testified to the British superiority at sea) were proving to be superior to their Italian adversaries in every respect. A conclusion the Italians themselves were rapidly coming to: 'At the end of the first week of war Mussolini confessed to the King: Affairs on the Egyptian frontier did not turn out too brilliantly'.<sup>341</sup>

With their advance to Sidi Barrani completed Graziani's army set about consolidating their position and commenced a comprehensive programme of digging in. 'Starting at Maktila on the coast and working down to Sofafi about 40 miles to the south-west, the Italians began to build a series of fortified camps. There were eight main positions: 'Maktila and Sidi Barrani on the coast; Tummar West, Tummar East and Point 90 to the south of Sidi Barrani; Nibeiwa was to the south of the Tummars and Sofafi and Rabia to the south-west of Nibeiwa'.<sup>342</sup> The Italians then set about filling these camps with stores and equipment of every kind and, in their usual manner, creating for themselves tolerable even luxurious living conditions. They lost no time in installing comfortable living quarters complete with electricity, water and refrigeration. To defend their camps the Italians deployed about 80,000 troops, supported by some 250 guns, and somewhere in the region of 120 tanks.<sup>343</sup>

---

<sup>337</sup> *ibid*

<sup>338</sup> Connell, p. 271.

<sup>339</sup> Lyman, p. 27.

<sup>340</sup> Fernyhough, p. 117.

<sup>341</sup> Jackson, p. 16.

<sup>342</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 78.

<sup>343</sup> Woollcombe, p. 31.

## CHAPTER 2

*Since war can be thought of in two different ways – its absolute form or one of the variant forms that it actually takes – two different concepts of success arise. In the absolute form of war, where everything results from necessary causes and one action rapidly affects another, there is, if we use the phrase, no intervening void. Since war contains a host of interactions since the whole series of engagements is, strictly speaking, linked together, since in every victory there is a culminating point beyond which lies the realm of losses and defeats – in view of all these intrinsic characteristics of war, we may say that there is only one result that counts – final victory. Until then, nothing is decided, nothing won, and nothing lost. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* <sup>344</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter's overall objective will be to examine the three main military engagements which occurred in the Middle East from winter 1940 through to March 1941. The chapter will start with a review of the British counterattack on the Italian forces that had invaded British held territory in Egypt Operation *Compass*. This engagement will not in its self be described in detail as there are many accounts which chronicle this operation. However, aspects of the operation such as the forces involved their character and deployment, logistic and intelligence issues which did effect later operations will be reviewed in some detail. The British involvement in East Africa will also be referenced and aspects of this operation that had implications for the later battle at Brega will also be reviewed. These two events will be paralleled by a review of the British involvement and intervention in Greece. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the overall military situation which prevailed in the Western Desert and more generally in the Middle East at the conclusion of Operation *Compass* in early February 1941.

### THE BRITISH COUNTER ATTACK *COMPASS*

The story of the Italian Army's defeat over the winter of 1940/41 in Operation *Compass* has been told many times and in great detail and will, therefore, not be recounted in depth in this work.<sup>345</sup> However, there are logistic and operational aspects of this campaign, which impacted directly on events, which did affect the battle at Brega and, therefore these must be explored.

With the arrival of the *Apology* convoy and other reinforcements the amount of British military muscle in the Middle East was greatly increased. This fact was fully appreciated by Churchill who had taken considerable risk in sending reinforcements to Wavell and now wanted some action. As Jackson observes, and with some justification

---

<sup>344</sup> Clausewitz, p. 582.

<sup>345</sup> John Connell, George Forty and Correlli Barnett all give excellent accounts of Operation *Compass*.

in view of the scale of the reinforcement now reaching Wavell, 'Churchill felt that Wavell's command was becoming a bottomless pit which devoured precious resources without giving anything in return'.<sup>346</sup>

These reinforcements now made it possible to seriously look at attacking the Italians. On 20 October Wavell sent Wilson a letter in which he asked him to explore the possibility of attacking the Italian forward camps set out around and below Sidi Barrani.<sup>347</sup> Also enclosed in this letter was Wavell's own plan for the operation. Thus the letter set in motion planning which would ultimately lead to Operation *Compass* being implemented. The, Wavell, "five day raid",<sup>348</sup> as the initial British advance against the Italians is often labelled, was to be a rather tentative and limited attempt to try and force the Italians back over the Libyan/Egyptian border. Wavell wrote that the operation he 'had in mind was a short swift one, lasting four or five days at most, and taking every advantage of the element of surprise'.<sup>349</sup> Although, the plan did, as we shall see, have wider ambitions if things went well. Moreover, although it was billed as Wavell's plan, and Wavell did little to dispel this impression, the actual plan adopted was devised and implemented by O'Connor. As George Forty says; 'the initial idea for Operation *Compass* was thus Wavell's but it would be O'Connor who would turn the 'five day raid' into a spectacular victory'.<sup>350</sup> John Harding, who was O'Connor's Chief of Staff, was to write of the origins of the plan:

the plan of battle was hatched in O'Connor's brain, the tactical decisions on which success or failure depended were his, the grim determination that inspired all our troops stemmed from his heart; it was his skill in calculating the risks, and his daring in accepting them, that turned what might have been merely a limited success into a victorious campaign with far-reaching effects on the future course of the war.<sup>351</sup>

---

<sup>346</sup> Jackson, p. 29.

<sup>347</sup> Connell, p.278.

<sup>348</sup> Schofield, p. 155.

<sup>349</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 82.

<sup>350</sup> *ibid*

<sup>351</sup> Bryant, p. 203.

Following on from his 20 October note to Wilson, which as mentioned asked him to explore ways of counterattacking the Italians, Wavell sent to Wilson, on 2 November, his only written directive for Operation *Compass*.

In continuation of my Personal and Most Secret letter of 20<sup>th</sup> October, I wish to inform your senior commanders in the Western Desert as follows: I have instructed Lieut-Gen O'Connor, through you, to prepare an offensive operation against the Italian forces in their present positions (if they do not continue their advance) to take place as soon as possible.<sup>352</sup>

O'Connor, however, needed no instructions from Wavell or anyone else. By late November O'Connor, with virtually no input from Wavell, had completed his own plans for *Compass*. Wilson delivered O'Connor's revised plan to Wavell who immediately approved the plan and ordered that preparations for its implementation should commence at once.

However, although Wavell approved the plan it seems he had reservations about its success. In a briefing note given to Wilson on 28 November Wavell wrote: 'I know you have in mind and are planning the fullest possible exploitation of any initial success of *Compass* operation. You and all commanders in the Western Desert may rest assured that the boldest action whatever its results, will have the support not only of myself but of the CIGS and of the War Cabinet at home'.<sup>353</sup> This encouraging opening was, however, quickly qualified with the following remarks: 'I am not entertaining extravagant hopes of this operation, but I do wish to make certain that if a big opportunity occurs we are prepared morally, mentally and administratively to use it to the fullest'.<sup>354</sup> Wavell, it seems, was telling Wilson that although he had little faith in O'Connor's mission succeeding, if it did and a big opportunity occurred, he would hope that, he, Wilson, would be bold and exploit any success to the fullest. Moreover, if he was bold and the success came he could expect his superior's fullest support. The words

---

<sup>352</sup> Baynes, p. 72.

<sup>353</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 82.

<sup>354</sup> Lewin,, pp. 67/68.

“big opportunity”, “fullest support” and particularly “administratively” must be borne in mind throughout this section of the work.

Regardless of the fact that Wavell was not entertaining extravagant hopes for the coming offensive the prospects of British success, despite the odds, looked quite favourable. While it might be remembered that the Italians themselves knew they were ill prepared for war so did the British. In May 1939 ‘Gordon-Finlayson, had observed Italian troops and remarked; how embarrassed the Italians are in many ways and how unlikely they are to make war in Libya on two fronts; and in any case how unlikely they are to rush into it without more preparations than they have now’.<sup>355</sup>

It was soon confirmed after hostilities began that Italian preparations for war had not improved significantly since Finlayson made his comments in May 1939. On 11 June 1940, only one day after war with Italy had been declared, a patrol of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars set an ambush which captured a column of Italian lorries and guns near Fort Capuzzo one of their bases close to the Libyan/Egyptian boarder.<sup>356</sup> The Hussars, however, did more than just take prisoners and equipment they confirmed that the Italians facing them were in no way prepared for war. Moreover, the Italian response to British skirmishing in the weeks following the Hussar’s ambush did little to greatly worry British commanders.

However, nothing in war is ever certain. Wavell was therefore, perhaps, correct not to over play his hand and declare *Compass* a full-blown offensive, which is what it soon became, until he had seen how things were going. The British logistic situation although greatly improved was still not perfect and there was the continual shortage of motor transport which would dictate to some extent how far and how fast the advance could proceed. As Michael Carver points out; ‘the principal determining factor in the speed

---

<sup>355</sup> Raugh, p. 47.

<sup>356</sup> Connell, p. 238.

with which the subsequent advance could be conducted was logistic, and the key to that was the availability of motor transport'.<sup>357</sup>

### THE FIRST THREE DAYS

Nonetheless, despite Wavell's low expectations for *Compass*, and the shortage of transport, the initial attacks by the two divisions assigned to the operation, 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division and 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division, were spectacularly successful. The British made rapid advances over the first three days of the operation. O'Connor soon proved to be an excellent and inspirational leader. The forces under his leadership quickly overcame the poorly equipped and badly led Italians cooped up in their fortified encampments. 'Surrendered Italian troops became so numerous, that unable to count them, a 7<sup>th</sup> Hussars officer reported, 'As far as I can see, we have captured about twenty acres of officers and about a hundred acres of men'.<sup>358</sup>

The captured Italian personnel were an encumbrance, and 'the feeding and evacuation of the vast numbers of prisoners threw a heavy strain on the Lines of Communication, this was [however] eased by the Navy who took many back by sea'.<sup>359</sup> This help from the Navy meant that the many serviceable vehicles which fell into British hands were freed up and had the potential to be a massive enhancement to capability. 'The total of captured vehicles was never recorded (units were notoriously reticent on this theme), but more than a thousand were at least admitted to be in British hands'.<sup>360</sup> Moreover, amongst the captured vehicles were large quantities of 10-ton Diesel lorries which proved to be extremely valuable.<sup>361</sup> This haul of over a thousand vehicles was, in fact, enough to supply the front line needs of at least one division.<sup>362</sup>

---

<sup>357</sup> Carver, p. 17.

<sup>358</sup> Neillands, p. 53.

<sup>359</sup> Verney, p. 33.

<sup>360</sup> Connell, p. 295.

<sup>361</sup> David Hunt, *A Don at War* (London: William Kimber, 1966) p. 52.

<sup>362</sup> Davis, Section V.

There can be no doubt that Wavell's lack of transport, one of his recurring complaints, would have been greatly relived, if not eradicated completely, if these vehicles had been utilised efficiently and promptly. However, Wavell, despite his insistence that Wilson should be "ready administratively", had not, as we have seen, ordered before the fighting started, that additional drivers should be made ready to utilise any serviceable vehicles acquired. Whilst this lack of preparedness may be partially excusable in view of the fact that Wavell could not have known beforehand how many vehicles would be captured his action once this became a reality is far less excusable.

We will see shortly that Wavell intended to bring forward an Australian division. However, although there were over thirty thousand Australian troops in the Middle East at this time they were extremely short of transport.<sup>363</sup> They were, however, not short of drivers.<sup>364</sup> Because of the remote nature of their homeland, and the need therefore for men to be self reliant, the proportion of men able to drive in Australian units was far higher than in British units.<sup>365</sup> Consequently Wavell had a huge pool of unemployed drivers and vast quantities of captured unmanned trucks. It would therefore have seemed obvious to have ordered forward Australian drivers to both take over vehicles to equip their own units and to form ancillary transport companies. Unfortunately, no order was given and most of the trucks remained unused for quite some time. Fighting units took what they could of the captures, to

---

<sup>363</sup> The Board of Management, *Active Service* (Canberra: The Military History and Information Section A.I.F, 1941) p. 5. Throughout 1940 Australian troops poured into the Middle East by the time of *Compass* there were three complete infantry divisions and ancillary troops such as artillery, signallers and transport companies.

<sup>364</sup> J. N. L. Argent, *Target Tank*, (Parramatta: History Committee, 1957), pp. 20/22. *Target Tank* is the Regimental history of 2/3 Australian anti-tank gun Regiment. This unit composed of nearly six hundred men was at the time of *Compass* in Egypt but without guns. Consequently as they needed at least 200 drivers to make them operational these drivers were left idle in the Delta. Moreover, as with many of the Australian units they had set up their own motor driving school as a result this unit alone could have supplied many hundreds of drivers.

<sup>365</sup> Wilson, p. 63. Wilson tells us that the 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division 'contained a high percentage of men accustomed to various types of internal combustion engines'.

replace and enhance their existing issue of transport, but that is as far as it went.<sup>366</sup>

This was to be one of many grievous administrative failures perpetrated by Wavell in this operation.

British and Indian troops did, however, make more use of some of the other stores and war materials they captured. 'The Italians went to war on a deluxe basis. It had been decided that it was too much of a hardship to expect Italian troops, or at any rate Italian officers, to drink the local water which was good enough for their British opponents and thousands of cases of bottled water from Reccoaro Spa were imported into Libya and carried forward in vast quantities; even to the most far flung outposts'.<sup>367</sup> In the coming weeks this delicious water would be gratefully consumed by thousands of thirsty British and Indian troops, as would other stores captured from the Italians.

The British captured 'a positive cornucopia of food and drink. According to one journalist who witnessed this on the spot, the latter included freshly baked bread, fresh vegetables, jars of liqueurs, huge amounts of spaghetti and macaroni and Parmesan cheese the size of wagon-wheels'.<sup>368</sup> Also among the captured stores were thousands of gallons of fuel, which again the British used to supplement their own supplies. This was doubly beneficial for as Verney points out in his book *The Desert Rats* 'fortunately much of the petrol captured from the Italians was in more robust containers'.<sup>369</sup> These robust containers, storage tanks of all sizes, barrels and drums were eagerly utilised by the advancing combat troops to carry extra fuel and water.

## **THE EXCHANGE OF 4 INDIAN & 6 AUSTRALIAN DIVISIONS**

This section of the work will examine the extraordinary decision taken by Wavell to remove 4 Indian Division from the Western Desert and send them to East Africa and the perhaps even more extraordinary decision to replace them with 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division.

---

<sup>366</sup>Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p.116. By the end of the third day of fighting the British had captured thousands of Italian vehicles.

<sup>367</sup> Hunt, p. 52.

<sup>368</sup> Buckingham, p. 91.

<sup>369</sup> Verney, p. 33.



The success of the initial British attack had been truly breath taking and now all looked set for a complete route of the disorganised and battered Italians. However, on the third day of Operation *Compass*, with total victory within O'Connor's grasp, Wavell, gave his army commander some remarkable news. Although Wavell now had the vehicles, fuel, stores, food and the obvious military success, which it will be remembered he had told Wilson to exploit to the fullest, Wavell now revealed to his army commander, that 4 IID, half his fighting strength, and over half of his serviceable transport was to be taken from him and sent to the Sudan.<sup>370</sup>

Before a shot had even been fired in Operation *Compass* Wavell had made a series of bizarre strategic decisions which he now unveiled. What Wavell now intended to do, after just three days of fighting, was to remove 4 IID their accompanying artillery units, and all their transport and send them all to the Sudan. This Wavell contended was to bolster General Platt's army facing the Duke of Aosta on the "important" East African front. Their place was to be filled, as quickly as resources would permit, by 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Division (6 AID) now on their way to Alexandria from Palestine.

Wavell's extraordinary decision had been made the week before Operation *Compass* had begun. 'On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Wavell held a conference in Cairo with General Platt from the Sudan and General Alan Cunningham from Kenya. He then shared with them a secret to which nobody but General Wilson was privy – nobody in London, not even O'Connor: he intended very shortly to switch 4 Indian Division from the Western Desert Force to the East African front'.<sup>371</sup> Wavell's reasons for withdrawing all three brigades of 4 IID, their divisional artillery and the supporting 7<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment of artillery and send them to Sudan were many and varied. However, as we shall see, none of the reasons given at the time were very compelling, and they are certainly not convincing, while the real reason, given later, is both surprising and militarily incomprehensible. Furthermore,

---

<sup>370</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 120.

<sup>371</sup> Lewin, p. 69.

in regard to the events which would happen later at Brega, this withdrawal may be viewed as a major contributing factor in the subsequent defeat.

## SHIPPING

Wavell, writing to O'Connor after the war on his decision to replace 4 IID with 6 AID, claimed that his main reason for making the swap when he did 'was a matter of shipping; a convoy had come into Suez, and I could use some of the returning ships to transport part of the Division to Port Sudan, the only means by which I could get the Division complete in the Sudan by the time I had fixed as the latest favourable date for attacking the Italians'.<sup>372</sup> This statement is not only contradictory it is also untrue.

Wavell says that he needed to move 4 IID when he did because he could embark part of the Division in the returning shipping, which would pass Port Sudan. However, in the same sentence he contradicts himself by saying that this was "the only way" he could get, "the whole of the Division complete" to Sudan, not just part of it.

The truth is that he did not utilise the convoy he mentions to move the whole of 4 IID, as he told O'Connor he did; only 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of 4 IID was moved in this shipping. This Brigade, which had been earmarked to guard Port Sudan, landed there on 2 January.<sup>373</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade and a field regiment of artillery did not use any ocean going shipping they moved first overland by rail and then in a Nile steamer, they eventually reached Khartoum on 9 January.<sup>374</sup> Moreover, this was a tried and tested way of moving troops down to the Sudan. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Worcestershire Regiment, for example, had taken this route in early 1940. There was a railway which ran from Cairo to Shellal almost on the border with the Sudan. From Shellal boats on

---

<sup>372</sup> *ibid*, p. 70.

<sup>373</sup> Michael Glover, *An Improvised War* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987) p. 65.

<sup>374</sup> Raugh, p.103.

the Nile River moved troops down to the township of Gebeit where another railway can be taken right in to Port Sudan.<sup>375</sup>

The 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade and two field regiments of artillery were moved to Port Sudan in a separate convoy, which left Port Said on 1 January. These troops and guns arrived in Port Sudan on 14 January.<sup>376</sup> As may be recalled convoys arrived and departed Egypt approximately every six weeks. Consequently had Wavell wanted to he could have moved the whole of any division in the 1 January convoy. We may see therefore that Wavell's argument, that the only way he could get the whole of 4 IID complete to the Sudan in the returning convoy is, at best, only one third true. Of the other two thirds of the division one third went overland and by riverboat and the last third was sent in a later convoy. As Raugh says, 'Wavell's emphasis on the urgency of withdrawing the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division to meet priority shipping schedules is not convincing'.<sup>377</sup>

#### **4 INDIAN: CHARACTER, TRAINING & ADMINISTRATION**

Michael Carver gives us a further questionable set of reasons for the switch. He claims the decision to send 4 IID to the Sudan was that 'both on account of its character and training and also for administrative reasons, it was more suitable than the inexperienced Australian for employment in Platt's force'.<sup>378</sup> In character 4 IID was, in fact, not that much different to any other division in British service. Its weapons, establishment and equipment were for the most part standard British issue. The training that 4 IID received was also not significantly different to that of a standard British division, although they were an extremely well trained and well-led division.

Carver further claimed that the men of 4 IID were proficient in mountain warfare; however, there is no evidence to support his claim that the Indians were mountain

---

<sup>375</sup> Lord Birdwood, *The Worcestershire Regiment 1922-1950* (London: Gale & Polden, 1952) pp. 17/18.

<sup>376</sup> Glover, p. 65.

<sup>377</sup> Raugh, p.103.

<sup>378</sup> Carver, p. 17.

trained. The 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade (11 IB) of 4 IID, the first brigade to reach Egypt, had been raised in 1938. They had then commenced their training in India as a standard infantry brigade and were not fully fit for service until July 1939. Once they had completed their training they were sent, in late 1939, to the almost billiard table flat Egypt. Furthermore, in each brigade one battalion and all the gunners were British and they were certainly not mountain trained. The composition of 11 IB was, for example, 2 Cameron Highlanders, 1/6 Rajputana Rifles, 4/7 Rajput Regiment and 4 Field Regiment R.A.<sup>379</sup> It is true that some of the Indians and Scots troops in 4 IID did originate from mountainous regions of India and Scotland, but this hardly qualified any of them to be classed as mountain troops.

The administrative reasons Carver alludes to are also difficult to reconcile with known facts. The use of Indian troops already in East Africa was for various reasons, mainly clothing and dietary, more burdensome on the supply system than using British or Australian troops. Australian troops wore essentially British uniforms and their dietary needs were the same as British troops and could easily be satisfied from existing stockpiles. Indian troops on the other hand had slightly different clothing needs and required a more specialised diet. The RAOC had this to say about supplying Indian troops. 'Indian Army formations were not equipped to British scales when they arrived. This was an additional burden casually imposed on an already overburdened Corps'.<sup>380</sup> Of particular burden were the Indian troop's dietary needs. Accommodating the Indian's meat requirements was to prove difficult on many occasions during the war. For example, 'the lack of fresh meat was a great trial to Indian troops locked up in Tobruk, and it was difficult to provide a suitable substitute, but on two occasions live sheep for them were conveyed on the deck of a destroyer. When the ship reached the

---

<sup>379</sup> G. R. Stevens, *Fourth Indian Division* (London: McLaren and Son, 1948) p. 2.

<sup>380</sup> Fernyhough, p. 115.

entrance of Tobruk harbour, the sheep were thrown overboard, and those that managed to swim ashore had their throats cut by the cheering Indians'.<sup>381</sup>

## **SPEED**

Finally Wavell claimed that he needed to get 4 IID down to the Sudan quickly to prevent the Italians from interfering with shipping using the Red Sea to reinforce Egypt. However, if the threat from the Duke of Aosta's forces had been real and the danger to British shipping using the Red Sea had been so acute, why take the costly and time-consuming option of removing 4 IID from the fighting in North Africa when the Australians were readily available? Most of the senior commanders of 6 AID had all served as regimental officers in the First World War, as had many of their unit commanders. This meant that the more junior officers had all been trained under battle experienced leaders. 'Add to this the general toughness, fitness; enthusiasm, competence and good humour of the rank and file, and here was a force capable of performing miracles'.<sup>382</sup> If 6 AID was ready for action (indeed ready to perform miracles) against the Italians in North Africa by 3 January, and evidence confirms that it was, then logic dictates that it would be just as ready to fight Italians in East Africa well before Platt's proposed attack date of 9 February.

This extraordinary decision to exchange the divisions is, however, in view of what Wavell had previously communicated to Wilson about exploiting any big opportunity, and the overwhelmingly favourable results that O'Connor had already secured, extremely difficult to comprehend. As Don West says of the switch of divisions; 'if Benito Mussolini himself had dreamed up some fearful act of sabotage against British

---

<sup>381</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 107.

<sup>382</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p.136.

forces, and had the muscle to carry it out, it could hardly have struck with greater force below the belt'.<sup>383</sup>

So if none of the reasons given by Wavell hold any water why did he order such a damaging and potentially catastrophic substitution? The real reason Wavell ordered the switch of divisions was a vain attempt to try and restore his damaged reputation with Churchill. It was no secret in the upper circles of the government and the military that Churchill had little time for Wavell and considered him a poor general; and Wavell knew this. Wavell always conscious to preserve his reputation as a thinking general and keen to maintain his command in the Middle East felt, quite correctly, that the previous August's evacuation of British troops from British Somaliland and Churchill's condemnation of the withdrawal and his subsequent criticism, cast a slur on his reputation. Consequently Wavell was desperate to retrieve British Somaliland and with it restore his reputation. Confiding his thoughts on the subject to Dill at the conclusion of Operation *Compass* Wavell was to write:

The loss of British Somaliland has always rankled bitterly both with my Government and myself. I got a rocket from the Government and nearly lost my job at the time of the loss of Somaliland. I have ordered its capture as soon as resources are available, and am most anxious to remove this blot on my reputation.<sup>384</sup>

## LOGISTICS

Nonetheless, despite the impending removal of 4 IID, the results of the first three days of combat in Operation *Compass* had been very productive for the British. 'In three days, Western Desert Force had captured 38,000 Italian and Libyan prisoners, 237 guns, 73 light or medium tanks and over 1,000 vehicles'.<sup>385</sup> All the enemy camps, which had been the objective of the "five day raid", had been annihilated and many enemy soldiers had been killed. This unexpectedly quick and relatively cheap victory had radically

---

<sup>383</sup> Don West, *Fox Killed in the Open* (Cambridge: Warrior Press, 1992) p. 50.

<sup>384</sup> Letter from Wavell to Dill CAB 106/1209

<sup>385</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 120.

changed O'Connor's supply situation. The capture of the coast road, for example, had considerably eased the administrative situation. On the road a lorry could cover 250 miles for the same amount of petrol it would take it to travel 100 miles in the desert.<sup>386</sup>

It had been expected that the capture of the Italian camps, if they could be taken at all, would be a costly venture. It was thought that even if victory could be secured it would only be a limited victory, perhaps resulting in the Italians being pushed back over the boarder. Furthermore, even if this limited success could be achieved it would take at least five days to accomplish, would exhaust most of the supplies in the forward dumps and would almost certainly result in high casualties. The reality was that the success had been achieved at a cost of less than 700 casualties and in only three days.<sup>387</sup>

Consequently there were still plenty of supplies left in the dumps.

The ease of the victory had, in fact, resulted in O'Connor being left with a considerable surplus of his own and captured supplies. Moreover, despite the loss of the transport of 4 IID, 7 AD still had 'four companies of the RASC under command, Nos. 5, 58, 65 and 550, plus the 4<sup>th</sup> (New Zealand) Reserve Company, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Supply Issue Section of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps'.<sup>388</sup> Furthermore, the Armoured Corps Ordnance Field Park was sent forward which resulted in a proper organisation for the issue of vehicles and spare parts being set up.<sup>389</sup>

Casualties as can be seen had been incredibly light; approximately 700 out of a force of 36,000, so very few replacements were required. The only serious area of expenditure had been in artillery ammunition. In the opening attack of the campaign, for example, the seventy-two guns of the divisional artillery delivered an intense bombardment on the Nibeiwa camp.<sup>390</sup> Likewise 'the capture of Sidi Barrani by 16<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>386</sup> Verney, p. 32.

<sup>387</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 116.

<sup>388</sup> Neillands, p. 55.

<sup>389</sup> Verney, p. 35.

<sup>390</sup> Rough, p. 98.

Indian Infantry Brigade began with a fierce artillery duel which lasted all day'.<sup>391</sup>

However, shortages in artillery ammunition were rapidly made good by the existing logistic arrangements.<sup>392</sup> In all other respects the supply and manpower situation was excellent. O'Connor was to write after the campaign that:

I can say with certainty that I have never met a more efficient body of men than those of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division R.A.S.C. They never failed the troops on any occasion, and in spite of every difficulty such as execrable going and continual dust storms, their maintenance was kept up to a very high state of efficiency at all times, and this efficiency was fully appreciated by all the other units of the Division who depended on them for supplies.<sup>393</sup>

The light resistance had required far lower than expected expenditure of rifle ammunition. The capture of food, water and fuel, lavishly stockpiled by the Italians in their camps, meant that O'Connor now had more of these valuable commodities than when he started his attacks. Moreover, the capture of so many nearly new vehicles, and especially the many 10 tonners, meant that his ability to re-supply his forward troops by road would eventually be vastly enhanced. Furthermore, the recapture of the small port of Sidi Barrani had enabled the Navy to bring forward bulk supplies. Prior to the start of *Compass* two large X-Type lighters had been pre-loaded with petrol and supplies and were now ready to be unloaded in the port.<sup>394</sup>

To the advantages of light consumption of existing supplies, quick establishment of port facilities and windfall of extra transport, food and fuel, must be added the benefits of the huge logistic tail already in place to support the initial attack. The supply companies had been established on the scale they were to service the needs of two divisions now they only had to provide for one. As hard fighting turned out not to be required, and now nearly all fighting had been suspended, the supply convoys were

---

<sup>391</sup> Rea Leakey & George Forty, *Leakey's Luck* (Stroud: Sutton Press, 1999) p. 33.

<sup>392</sup> The Institute of the Royal Army Service Corps, p.121.

<sup>393</sup> Verney, p. 33.

<sup>394</sup> Buckingham, p. 91.



bringing more stores forward than were being consumed thus increasing stocks even further.

## **WAVELL'S LUCK HOLDS**

Wavell, as has been mentioned, kept his bizarre plan to transfer 4 IID almost exclusively to himself only confiding the move to a handful of his most trusted subordinates.<sup>395</sup> His motives for keeping the move secret are, perhaps, not difficult to understand. If O'Connor had been told earlier about the proposed move he would, as he did when he was informed, have objected. He may even have taken the matter up with some higher authority. Had Churchill found out what Wavell was up to he would in all probability, at the very least, have questioned Wavell's motives.

Churchill's view, and one that he stated forcibly to Wavell at the time, was that Wavell should pursue the Italians in North Africa at all costs and without delay. On 13 December 1940 he cabled Wavell and told him just that, mistakenly believing that Wavell felt the same way: 'naturally, pursuit will hold the first place in your thoughts. It is the moment when the victor is most exhausted that the greatest forfeit can be exacted from the vanquished. Nothing would shake Mussolini more than disaster in Libya itself'.<sup>396</sup> It was perhaps fortunate for Wavell that Churchill, at this juncture, remained in the dark about the switch.

On 17 December, Churchill, still completely unaware of the switch of divisions, cabled Wavell again congratulating him on the successes that had been achieved so far. He urged him again to continue with the assault and confirmed the secondary importance of the proposed campaign in Sudan. 'The Army of the Nile has rendered glorious service to the Empire and to our cause, and rewards are already being reaped by us in every quarter. We are deeply indebted to you, Wilson and other commanders

---

<sup>395</sup> Jackson, p. 41. Jackson tells us that Wavell and Wilson did not tell O'Connor about the withdrawal of 4 IID because they did not want to worry him.

<sup>396</sup> Connell, p. 296.

whose fine professional skill and audacious leading have gained us the memorable victory of the Libyan Desert'.<sup>397</sup> Churchill's congratulations were followed by his excited advice as to what should be Wavell's next move. 'Your first objective now must be to maul the Italian Army and rip them off the African shore to the utmost possible extent. We were very glad to learn your intentions against Bardia and Tobruk and now to hear of the latest captures of Sollum and Capuzzo'.<sup>398</sup>

As for the proposed reinforcement of Platt's forces in Sudan by the two brigades of 4 IID (there were in fact three by this time) Churchill makes it clear to Wavell, although it was by now too late, that this was of secondary importance.

Churchill continued:

'I feel convinced that it is only after you have made sure that you can get no farther that you will relinquish the main hope in favour of secondary action in the Sudan or Dodecanese. The Sudan is of prime importance, and eminently desirable and it may be that the two Indian brigades can be spared without prejudice to the Libyan pursuit battle. The Dodecanese will not get harder for a little waiting. But neither of them ought to detract from the supreme task of inflicting further defeats upon the main Italian Army'.<sup>399</sup>

Churchill, still unaware that the main advance through lack of troops and transport had stalled, cabled Wavell again on 18 December offering him, through biblical text, as much additional support as he needed. 'St. Matthew, chapter 7, verse 7. "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you."<sup>400</sup>

## INEVITABLE PROBLEMS

Also on 18 December 1940, Wavell, no doubt with Churchill's words at the forefront of his mind, sent a cable to Dill outlining the inevitable problems he was

---

<sup>397</sup> *ibid*, pp. 298/299.

<sup>398</sup> *ibid*

<sup>399</sup> *ibid*

<sup>400</sup> *ibid*, pp. 299/300.

now encountering (caused entirely by his own decision to switch 4 Indian) in maintaining O'Connor's advance.

Immediate problem is how to deal with Bardia. We can (a) try to induce garrison to surrender, (b) cut it off from Tobruk and lay siege to it, (c) leave road to Tobruk open though under observation and if enemy withdraws by it attack him in the open.

We have had a proclamation printed to drop on garrison to induce (a), and shall use it if situation seems favourable. At the moment it would not be likely to succeed'.

We are not strong enough for (b). We are operating at the extreme limit of our resources and it will be some days before we can supply any more troops as far forward.

Course (c) is on whole most favourable. Bardia and its resources as a landing place and source of water supply are more valuable to us than the bodies in it and it would be easier to attack them in the open than behind the strong defences. We are therefore leaving loophole of escape towards Tobruk, and at the same time bringing more troops forward as rapidly as transport situation permits, in case course (b) becomes necessary.

We shall try course (a) whenever situation looks favourable. Meanwhile bombardment by air and sea continues. We are considering plans if Bardia falls and I will outline them later. Meanwhile transport is my chief anxiety; these desert operations at such distances are throwing very heavy strain on all vehicles. Am already using captured Italian vehicles and have most urgent request from Greek C-in-C for transport.<sup>401</sup>

This cable reveals what Wavell must have known would happen to the advance when he decided to replace 4 IID with 6 AID. He tells us that he would like to lay siege to Bardia with the hope no doubt of inducing the garrison into surrendering. However, as Wavell freely admits, O'Connor now had insufficient transport and too few troops. It must be remembered here that at this date most of 6 AID were still in Egypt. Moreover, the three 10 ton transport companies, which would come into operation using captured vehicles, were not yet available. Consequently, at this juncture, O'Connor was now not strong enough to embark on a full-scale attack. He was hardly able to maintain an effective siege. He would have to wait until the Australians and the transport were ready in January.

---

<sup>401</sup> *ibid*, pp. 297/298.

## WATER

As O'Connor and his remaining troops settled down to their siege the lack of water in the forward areas became particularly serious, and as the latter days of December passed by the situation became even worse. Moreover, the delay in taking Bardia only exacerbated the problem. The water needed by the advancing units had been supplied, up to this point, by water trucks<sup>402</sup> and water carried in 4-gallon tins by lorry or by captured water resources. Now the captured water resources were either running out or had been left far behind and most of the vehicles were either leaving the desert for good or being used to transport troops, consequently water was short.<sup>403</sup> It had been hoped that the taking of Fort Capuzzo, an Italian held strong point in rear of Bardia, and known to have a large water storage facility, would ease the water shortages. However, 'it was found that the water in the storage tanks was too salt for use and 12,000 gallons had to be brought forward from Matruh – by road, again, which used up mileage in the battered and now labouring 3-tonners'.<sup>404</sup>

However, the discovery of the unavailability of increased water resources at Capuzzo did have its beneficial aspects, and would, as we shall see later, have a potential beneficial effect on the defence of Brega. The dire water situation forced Wavell to put in train a series of measures to help to try and solve the water problem. He had in reality little choice in the matter. Either he supplied his men with water or they would have to retreat back to Matruh. As even the reduced force now stranded in the desert needed adequate water to function. Moreover, as Wavell must have known, had a retreat back to Matruh occurred it would almost certainly have prompted Churchill to ask potentially awkward questions.

---

<sup>402</sup> Fernyhough, p. 119.

<sup>403</sup> Verney, p. 33.

<sup>404</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 143.

The immediate water problem was in the end largely solved by drilling pump-holes at Sidi Barrani and Buq Buq and running a pipeline to Sollum and filling the tanks at Capuzzo once they had been cleared of salt water.<sup>405</sup> These measures, once implemented, significantly relived O'Connor's water problems and eased the burden on the truck borne water-carrying companies.

### **BARDIA: THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN VICTORY**

While all this work on the water supply system was being carried out 6 AID moved forward in preparation for their attack on Bardia. Had Wavell not decided to exchange divisions 4 IID would almost certainly have taken Bardia in mid December. The troops of its garrison were, as it turned out, as poorly motivated and equipped as all the other troops in the so-called fortress towns. However, this was impossible as the first Australian troops, one brigade group, did not leave their camp site near Alexandria until 16 December, 1940.<sup>406</sup> Consequently due to the slow movement of the Australian 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Brigades, and the never-ending problems of supply, the attack on Bardia could not take place before 2 January 1941.<sup>407</sup> Bardia, when it was finally attacked fell to the Australians in two days. The assault finally went in at 5.30 a.m. on 3 January and continued for two days. By early afternoon of 5 January the Italians had surrendered and O'Connor was master of Bardia. That night Wavell hosted a "mammoth cocktail party" in Cairo.<sup>408</sup>

Had Bardia fallen earlier there is no doubt that it would have greatly eased many of O'Connor's supply problems, notably water. Unfortunately the enforced delay caused by the transfer of the two divisions meant that virtually all the material advantages gained in the early stages of the campaign were wasted. As it was by the time the town

---

<sup>405</sup> *ibid*

<sup>406</sup> The Board of Management of the Australian War Memorial, p. 6.

<sup>407</sup> Baynes, pp. 83/84.

<sup>408</sup> Schofield, p 166.

was occupied in early January the British troops already in the forward areas and the Australian troops moving up, had consumed much of the surplus food, water and fuel, both captured and that already in the forward dumps. Early capturer would have made available thousands more tons of Italian supplies stored within the town, enabling them to be utilised to support further advances. Moreover, occupying this port town sooner would have allowed the British to ship thousands of tons of supplies into the port. As Sun Tzu perceptively observes; ‘one who excels in employing the military dose not conscript the people twice or transport provisions a third time. If you obtain your equipment from within the state and rely on seizing provisions from the enemy, then the army’s foodstuffs will be sufficient. The state is impoverished by the army when it transports provisions far off’.<sup>409</sup>

O’Connor was extremely lucky to get anything out of the capture of Bardia. Because of the delay imposed by the switch of divisions the Italians were allowed nearly three weeks to do as they liked in Bardia. The delay gave them plenty of time, if they had been so inclined, which fortunately for the British they were not, to set demolitions to destroy their supplies.

As luck would have it when Bardia was finally captured it was found that ‘the garrison had made no attempt to destroy the water supply or port facilities in their rush to surrender’.<sup>410</sup> The garrison had also luckily made no attempt to destroy the thousands of tons of supplies and equipment still stored in the town. ‘The Australians took over 400 guns, 130 light and medium tanks, hundreds of machine guns and anti-tank guns, thousands of rifles vast quantities of equipment, two complete field hospitals, splendidly equipped, many motor cycles and even a few good horses’.<sup>411</sup> In amongst the 400 artillery pieces captured in Bardia there were some particularly valuable types

---

<sup>409</sup> Sun Tzu, Stone, *The Art of War*, 1993, p. 173.

<sup>410</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 147.

<sup>411</sup> The Board of Management of the Australian War Memorial, p.12.

found. Most importantly there were 26 heavy anti-aircraft guns and 40 light infantry guns.<sup>412</sup> These light infantry guns were, in fact, Breda's, a type of gun highly prized by both the British and the Germans.

The water resources, supplies, equipment, weapons and the intact port facilities of Bardia were of course very welcome. However, for the Australians, and for the next part of O'Connor's plan the attack on Tobruk, the greatest prize was the acquisition of 708 motor trucks captured in working order.<sup>413</sup> Unlike the British the Australians made liberal use of these vehicles. Despite Wavell's debilitating orders and erratic use of his scarce resources by mid-January O'Connor and his men were ready to continue the pursuit.

## **TOBRUK**

The capture of Tobruk was O'Connor's next objective. General Pitassi Mannella, commanded the garrison of Tobruk which comprised of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Corps with about 25,000 men and over 200 artillery pieces.<sup>414</sup> It might have been thought that Wavell would take a great interest in this next objective, as its importance from both a propaganda perspective and as a military asset were enormous. With such prizes in prospect it might have been expected that Wavell would remain at his headquarters as the attack date approached to give O'Connor support or advice should he need it. This was not to be the case. On 13 January Wavell headed off to Greece and did not return to Cairo until late on 17 January. His need to be away for so long was in part to have talks with the Greek military on developments in the Balkans. However, a secondary reason was so that he could host an enormous luncheon at the Hotel Grande Bretagne in honour of the Greek dictator General Metaxas.<sup>415</sup>

---

<sup>412</sup> Baynes, p. 84.

<sup>413</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p.148.

<sup>414</sup> *ibid*, p.154.

<sup>415</sup> Schofield, p 166.

Despite Wavell's absence this did not prevent O'Connor from pressing ahead with his plans to assault Tobruk. By 21 January he was ready and the Australians attacked. The Australian infantry, supported by 7 RTR with their Matilda tanks, were soon through the Italian perimeter defences. Within 24 hours, Tobruk had fallen and again most of its infrastructure and supplies were little damaged by demolition.<sup>416</sup> The capture of Tobruk was an enormous help to O'Connor. The amount of supplies captured in Tobruk dwarfed anything that had been taken in the other Italian garrisons. There were, once again, so many vehicles nobody bothered to count them; there were 87 tanks; and 236 guns of a calibre of 75 mm. and over. Moreover, 'the amount of food found in the dumps and warehouses in and around Tobruk contained sufficient food to feed 25,000 men for two months'.<sup>417</sup> The water distillation plant was still intact, the ports sub-artesian well system was functioning and the cisterns contained large quantities of water. Further water resources were captured in the form of 10,000 tons of bottled Reccoaro Spa mineral water.

Furthermore, because the Italians had been kind enough not to damage much of the ports infrastructure the port was quickly made ready to receive supply ships. Indeed only 48 hours after its capture naval clearance teams had made Tobruk ready to receive its first shipment of supplies.<sup>418</sup> The ongoing objective was to prepare the port 'to receive a weekly through put of 9,000 tons of stores, 2,500 tons of cased petrol, 1,500 tons of water, 500 personnel and 350 casualties for evacuation'.<sup>419</sup> Despite the three weeks delay imposed on O'Connor by the removal 4 IID he now had enough of everything he needed to pursue, and hopefully defeat, the retreating Italians.

---

<sup>416</sup> Ireland, p. 60.

<sup>417</sup> Buckingham, p.112.

<sup>418</sup> Ireland, p. 60.

<sup>419</sup> Buckingham, p.113.



## THE GEOGRAPHY

420



Up until this point the geography of western Egypt and eastern Libya had played little part in the outcome of the fighting. The Italian strongholds, ports, fortified villages and towns had been constructed largely without taking much consideration of the surrounding terrain. Most settlements had, in fact, been established where they were for their water resources and the availability of port facilities.

However, west and south of Tobruk the geography and terrain played a far more significant part in the outcome of the fighting. The area O'Connor's men were now approaching was 'vastly different in character from the Western Desert. This region was dominated by the Jebel Akhadar, an upland area rising to heights of 2,500 feet. Possessing fertile soil and the recipient of adequate rainfall, it was an important area for Italian colonisation'.<sup>421</sup> Therefore, to understand how the British victory at Beda Fomm, the final act of Operation *Compass*, was achieved it is important to understand the geographical conditions which prevailed in that part of the Western Desert where the majority of the next round of fighting took place.

It would be fair to say that the geographical conditions in the Western Desert, both manmade and natural, were to play an important and significant part in all future military operations. Indeed the military operations conducted by both sides would in large part be dictated by the geography of the region. In regard to the continuation of

<sup>420</sup> Map taken from Parnell's 'History of the Second World War' Volume 3 Number 7, p. 1079. 1967.

<sup>421</sup> Raugh, p.116.

Operation *Compass* the geography of Cyrenaica now played an important part in the looming Italian defeat.

Looking at the manmade geographical features in the region the metalled road, the Via Balbia, is undoubtedly the most important to this work. Leaving Cairo going west the road connects Tobruk, Timmimi, Derna, Benghazi, Barce, Beda Fomm, Mersa el Brega, El Agheila and ultimately Tripoli.<sup>422</sup> This road, running along the coast dictated in great measure the speed of movement and volume of supply of any army seeking to operate in the Western Desert. The lack of water and absence of roads in the deserts interior confined all armies, at least in the opening stages of the war in North Africa, to the coastal plain through which the road ran.<sup>423</sup> The water resources found alongside the road and the metalled road itself therefore played a vital role in all military activity.

Operations carried out away from the coastal plain, in the early stages of the desert war, were always-uncertain enterprises and were undertaken at considerable risk. Armies could, and did, in later phases of the war, because of improvements in equipment and greater experience of desert conditions operate further inland. However, in early 1941, the experience and equipment was not available. The skills and resources needed to survive and fight in the open desert were still being accumulated. With the dependence on the road and the water resources in the coastal plain in mind we may now look at the physical terrain.

Described simply the fighting area in the concluding stages of Operation *Compass*, and what would again become a fighting area later in the war, was a roughly triangular area of desert. At its centre was a roughly kidney shaped area of high and fertile ground known as the Jebel Akhadar.<sup>424</sup> Using the Via Balbia as our reference marker we may see that the north/south vertical axis of the triangle runs from the town of Benghazi in

---

<sup>422</sup> Eric Dorman O’Gowan, *History of the Second World War* (London: Purnell, 1967) p.1079. Map showing road and distances between many major towns on Egyptian/Libyan coast.

<sup>423</sup> Neillands, p. 33. Map showing detailed course of road from Cairo to El Agheila.

<sup>424</sup> Wilson, p. 37.

the north down past the village of Beda Fomm and on to the bottleneck of Mersa el Brega in the south. The west/east horizontal axis runs from Benghazi in the west through Barce, Derna and Timmimi and on to Tobruk in the east. The diagonal axis of the triangle leaves the Via Balbia at Timmimi a small village near the northern coast and via a rough track hits the costal road near Beda Fomm approximately seventy miles below Benghazi. The Timmimi or Jebel track, which is approximately one-hundred and fifty miles long, winds its way down through Mechili, Msus and Antelat and finally, arrives at Beda Fomm close to the western coast.

This triangle or bump in the coastline was known as the Cyrenaica Bulge. Within the triangle of the Cyrenaica Bulge there is only one significant feature the Cyrenaica Hills, known in Arabic as the Jebel Akadir<sup>425</sup> (Green Mountains) a hilly area quite thickly covered with trees. The Cyrenaica Hills are 50 miles across at their widest and extend 'for 150 miles following the curve of the coastline and separated from it by a strip of fairly level land that is between 10 and 30 miles broad'.<sup>426</sup> Although somewhat hilly and quite thickly covered with trees good roads existed in the Jebel.<sup>427</sup> This was not the case on the south/eastern edge of the Jebel where the Jebel track skirts the tree covered slopes. On the north/western side of the track the ground slopes upwards into the forest-

---

<sup>425</sup> The following is a description of the Jebel Mountains by the German General Major Alfred Toppe:

The mountains reached a height of 875 meters above sea level; they intercepted the moisture carried inland by the north wind. The heavier rainfall here is the reason why, in this area, the chalky ground carried a growth of macchia in contrast to the desert or steppe-like areas. These mountains rose in high, steep terraces, which could be traversed at only a few points and were intersected by numerous deep valleys, which made it impossible to conduct sizeable operations except along roads. South of the topmost ridges, the mountains sloped down gradually to the desert terrain, which was good for vehicular traffic. For this reason the Cyrenaica region was vulnerable to attack from the south, a fact that Rommel recognized at once during his attack in the spring of 1941. For this reason he delivered his main attack against Mechili, a desert fort designed to protect the southern approaches to the Cyrenaica. The fact that it was so easy to bypass is the reason why the Cyrenaica was never held with any degree of determination by either side during the entire campaign, although it could be called a natural fortress. During every retreat, every effort was made to pass through this region as rapidly as possible in order to avoid being intercepted (Toppe) *German Experience in World War II* General Major Alfred Toppe Translated and edited by: E. Heitman Reviewer: Capt. N. E. Devereux HISTORICAL DIVISION EUROPEAN COMMAND Introduction to Reprinted Edition)  
<http://www.xenophongi.org/milhist/modern/deswar2.htm>.

<sup>426</sup> Richard Townsend Bickers, *The Desert Air War 1939-1945*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1991) p. 10.

<sup>427</sup> Francis De Guingand, *Operation Victory* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1950) p. 48.

covered mountains. South of the Jebel track, as the high ground gives way to the flatter desert, the terrain was bolder strewn and difficult.<sup>428</sup>



429

Published by Malt International, P.O. Box 113.8375, Beirut, Lebanon

Editor, Professor Salam Ali Hajjaji, Ali Fatah University, Tarabulus

## ALONG THE COAST AND AROUND THE JEBEL TO VICTORY

In early February 7AD and 6 AID set off from Tobruk, along the Via Balbia, in pursuit of the remaining Italian forces still in Cyrenaica. At Timmimi elements of 7AD left the metalled road and struck out on the more southerly Jebel track. Their initial objective was the desert fort at Mechili at the entrance to the Jebel Akadir which was strongly held by the Italians. On 2 February O'Connor arrived at Mechili where he set up his tactical HQ. Within hours he had decided to launch what would turn out to be the last act of Operation *Compass*. He would send elements of 7AD 'across the desert from Mechili to the Gulf of Sirte, well below Benghazi, via Msus and Antelat, to the area of Beda Fomm'.<sup>430</sup> Once there, if his troops arrived before the fleeing Italians, they would

<sup>428</sup> Fraser, p. 116.

<sup>429</sup> Map Professor Salam Ali Hajjaji, Ali Fatah University Beirut Published by Malt International.

<sup>430</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p.169.

set up a blocking position. This would then prevent the Italians from escaping through Brega and El Agheila and on into Tripoli.

The Italian troops who had escaped from Tobruk and other troops in the remaining garrisons along the coast were trying to make good their escape on the Via Balbia. Their first objective was to reach Benghazi and then, turning down the road, head for Beda Fomm and the relative safety which lay beyond. They were hoping to find sanctuary by outrunning the pursuing British/Australian forces and reaching the relative security of Tripolitania. Their plan was, however, thwarted by O'Connor's forced march across the diagonal axis of the bulge from Mechili to the coast and 6 AID following behind on the coast road.<sup>431</sup> On the morning of 5 February, 1941, O'Connor's men reached Beda Fomm on the Via Balbia in front of the fleeing Italians. Meanwhile 6 AID still on the Via Balbia were by 6 February closing in on the rear of the stalled Italian army.<sup>432</sup> The Italians were now well and truly trapped with 6 AID preparing to attack their rear and 7AD blocking their forward movement. For two days the Italians struggled to breakthrough 7AD's blocking position. Finally after vicious fighting in the early morning of 7 February the Italians gave up the unequal struggle and surrendered.

## **THE SPOILS OF WAR**

Before O'Connor there now lay the wreckage of the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Army and: 'For the last time the booty of victory was counted: twenty two thousand prisoners, a hundred and twelve medium tanks, two hundred and sixteen guns and fifteen hundred wheeled vehicles'.<sup>433</sup> The sheer scale of the defeat and the amount and variety of war materials which had fallen into British hands was staggering.

Roy Farran remembers that; 'the lorries were crammed with all sorts of loot which the Italians had hoped to get to Tripoli, and the tanks were so full of bottles of wine, boxes of chocolates and tins of fruit that we could not traverse

---

<sup>431</sup> Raugh, p. 117.

<sup>432</sup> Wilson, pp. 60/61.

<sup>433</sup> Barnett, p. 57.

the turrets. There were china plates and silver cutlery in the officers' mess; we all wore clean Italian shirts; every officer in the regiment had a civilian car; the fitters found tools they had only dreamed of; the doctors had medical equipment which would not have disgraced the best London hospital; round our necks dangled Zeiss binoculars'.<sup>434</sup>

Among the vehicles was found a 'bus load of Italian ladies powdering their noses and brewing tea in the middle of the battlefield, protected by a loan priest in a soutane'.<sup>435</sup>

The men of Marshal Graziani's 10<sup>th</sup> Italian Army were, in fact, pleased the fighting was over. 'The main effect of 20 years of fascism had been to produce in the average Italian total apathy and cynicism about anything connected with politics. In the army, too, corruption and favouritism in appointments had produced a serious deterioration compared with the First World War'.<sup>436</sup>

Sensing that the Italians after their crushing defeat at Beda Fomm were finished in Libya O'Connor contacted Wavell in Cairo. On the afternoon of 7 February O'Connor's aide Dorman-Smith (Chink) fired off a message to Wavell, "Fox killed in the open," indicating to Wavell that the enemy they had been pursuing was now beaten.<sup>437</sup> O'Connor went on to explain to his superiors in Cairo that the Italian forces he had been fighting had virtually ceased to exist.

Moreover, intelligence from prisoners suggested that there was no other organised enemy force between his positions in Cyrenaica and the Libyan capital Tripoli. O'Connor felt that his forces although worn and weary were still capable of taking on the task and he was determined to press on the approximate 450 miles to Tripoli and finish the job. 'O'Connor's armoured cars passed through El Agheila on 8 February and, if they had not been stopped, would have been in Sirte on 12 February'.<sup>438</sup>

---

<sup>434</sup> Farran, p. 67.

<sup>435</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 190.

<sup>436</sup> Hunt, p. 56.

<sup>437</sup> John Keegan, Barrie Pitt, *Churchill's Generals* (London: Cassell, 2005) p. 197.

<sup>438</sup> Jackson, p. 91.

It was O'Connor's intention to advance from Sirte on 20 February utilising Cunningham's ships and supported by Longmore's Air Force. He also intended to land a brigade group near Tripoli and he fully expected to enter Tripoli without much difficulty by the end of the month.<sup>439</sup> O'Connor felt sure the order would soon come instructing him to continue the pursuit.<sup>440</sup>

It is clear from Wilson's writings that he also fully expected the re-grouping and reorganisation of O'Connor's forces to begin quickly. This would, in Wilson's view, enable the pursuit to be continued in the very near future. On 7 February Wilson realising that O'Connor's army had 'wiped out the bulk of the enemy forces in North Africa, and that any further resistance would be negligible, sent a signal to Wavell that night recommending that a light column be sent on to clear the Italians out of North Africa by advancing at least to Sirte and, if opportunity offered, to Tripoli'.<sup>441</sup>

#### **THE LOST OPPORTUNITY:**

When Wavell received the cable from O'Connor on 7 February and the one sent by Wilson later the same day he was initially in complete agreement with his field commander's assessments of the enemy's inability to fight on. However, he did not, perhaps surprisingly, either go up to see O'Connor or immediately authorise him to continue the advance. On the night of the victory, 7 February, Wavell went to yet another dinner party. This time the party was organised by Air Chief Marshal Longmore and among his guests was the Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies. 'During the dinner they listened to Churchill on the radio, praising his military commanders in the Middle East for their continuing victories in the Western Desert. [Churchill bellowed over the airwaves] Wavell, Commander-in-Chief of all the Armies of the Middle East,

---

<sup>439</sup> *ibid*, p. 91

<sup>440</sup> Baynes, p. 120.

<sup>441</sup> Wilson, p. 62.

has proved himself master of war, pains taking, daring and tireless, he declared'.<sup>442</sup> As the oration from Churchill got underway, Wavell, according to one of the guests, 'hid behind the door during the Prime Ministers effusion, only resuming his place when the eulogy had finished'.<sup>443</sup>

Well might Wavell have had cause to hide his head at this time; knowing as he did that not only had he played virtually no part in the victories in the desert his actions in removing 4 IID had almost caused the whole operation to fail. Moreover, now he was going to compound his strategic mismanagement by ordering O'Connor and Wilson to stop the advance.<sup>444</sup> Perhaps David Fletcher's opinion on this decision, given in *The Great Tank Scandal*, conveys the recklessness of this order: 'Rarely in the history of warfare can the potential fruits of complete victory have been thrown away with such a lack of prescience as they were after Beda Fomm'.<sup>445</sup>

After three days of reflection on O'Connor's request to continue the advance Wavell eventually sent a half hearted cable to Churchill in London. He asked for permission to pursue the enemy to Tripoli where he might, or might not, be successful in defeating him. Wavell's signal on 10 February began: 'Extent of Italian defeat at Benghazi makes it seem possible that Tripoli might yield to a small force if dispatched without delay'.<sup>446</sup> It might be worth noting here that Wavell had already imposed a three day delay on O'Connor by not acting on the 7 February cables.

However, once Churchill received Wavell's cable he was quick to reply. In return, on 11 February, Wavell received a telegram back from the Defence Committee informing him that he should not advance any further in Libya. After making himself

---

<sup>442</sup> Schofield, p. 171.

<sup>443</sup> *ibid*

<sup>444</sup> Wilson p. 62.

<sup>445</sup> Fletcher, p. 77.

<sup>446</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, p. 74.



secure in Cyrenaica he should then give Greece and /or Turkey top priority.<sup>447</sup> Also enclosed in this message there arrived Churchill's own personal instructions and advice to Wavell. The contents of this message and its third paragraph in particular, are crucial in understanding what Churchill now expected from his Commander-in-Chief.

However, before examining Churchill's cable in detail it is important to understand the context in which its instructions were sent. Wavell's 10 February cable expressed no positive indication that O'Connor would be able to take Tripoli indeed it gave a rather qualified indication that Tripoli "might yield" to a small force. Churchill with his broader view of the war to consider was, for obvious reasons; keen to get British troops back onto the continent of Europe fighting with as many allies as possible. Therefore it is against this back drop that the contents of his 11 February cable must be considered.

Churchill wrote on 11 February; We should have been content with making a safe flank for Egypt at Tobruk, and we told you that thereafter Greece and/or Turkey must have priority, but that if you could get Benghazi easily and without prejudice to European calls so much the better. We are delighted that you have got this prize three weeks ahead of expectation, but this does not alter, indeed it rather confirms, our previous directive, namely, that your major effort must now be to aid Greece and/or Turkey. This rules out any serious effort against Tripoli, although minor demonstrations thitherwards would be a useful faint. You should therefore make yourself secure in Benghazi and concentrate all available forces in the Delta in preparation for movement to Europe.<sup>448</sup>

In the concluding sentence of the above message Churchill makes it abundantly clear that making the desert flank safe is the number one priority.<sup>449</sup> Churchill clearly tells Wavell that he should make himself secure in Benghazi. Only then is he to concentrate all available forces in the Delta in preparation for movement to mainland Europe. As Churchill was to write in his *History of the Second World*; 'All our efforts to form a front in the Balkans were founded upon the sure maintenance of the Desert Flank in North Africa. This might have been fixed at Tobruk; but Wavell's rapid westward

---

<sup>447</sup> Connell, p. 327.

<sup>448</sup> Schofield, p. 171.

<sup>449</sup> Woolcombe, p. 61. Woolcombe uses the word sacrosanct to describe how important Churchill viewed the security of the desert flank.

advance [note Churchill does not refer to the rapid advance as O'Connor's] and the capture of Benghazi had given us all Cyrenaica. To this the sea corner at Agheila [Mersa el Brega] was the gateway. It was common ground between all authorities in London and Cairo that this must be held at all costs and in priority over every other venture'.<sup>450</sup> Only once this objective was achieved, the desert flank being made secure, would Churchill be content for Wavell to send forces to Greece and/or Turkey.

Churchill undoubtedly rules out a forward move on Tripoli, which Wavell later used as an excuse for his failure to order O'Connor to take Tripoli. However, it is inconceivable that had Churchill been made aware of the ease with which Tripoli could have been captured he would not have urged Wavell (O'Connor) to press on and take the city. As General Ismay was to write to O'Connor after the war: 'Wavell never put forward even the vaguest hint that you should go on to Tripoli, had he done so, I am pretty sure that the Prime Minister would have jumped at it'.<sup>451</sup> Unfortunately, Wavell never gave Churchill any such advice or information.

## **ATTACK TURNS TO DEFENCE**

Sun Tzu wrote: 'Those that excelled in warfare first made themselves unconquerable in order to await the moment when the enemy could be conquered. Being unconquerable lies with your self; being conquerable lies with the enemy'.<sup>452</sup> What Churchill now expected of Wavell was that he should make himself unconquerable in Cyrenaica by making his desert flank secure. Once this objective had been achieved then he could turn his attention to other theatres. Unfortunately instead of making his desert flank secure before embarking on alternative projects, as he had been instructed to do by his

---

<sup>450</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War Vol III*, p. 173.

<sup>451</sup> Letter from General Ismay to O'Connor 19-01-1949 found in O'Connor papers Liddell-Hart Centre Doc 4/3/14.

<sup>452</sup> Sun Tzu, Stone, *The Art of War*, 1993, p. 183.

political master, Wavell stripped the Western Desert of virtually all its military capacity thus making it eminently conquerable.

With the decision to virtually ignore the defence of Cyrenaica taken by Wavell he now cast his eye over the prospects of a successful intervention in Greece, and/or, Turkey. The Service Chiefs, and Wavell's, initial reaction to the Greece and/or Turkey mission, once the logistics of the operation had been explored, was not favourable. 'The reaction expressed by Wavell, Longmore and Cunningham pointed to the logistic difficulties, both in terms of the burden placed on the Royal Navy in safeguarding supply routes and in terms of shortages of anti-aircraft guns and aircraft'.<sup>453</sup>

The obvious military shortcomings already existing in the Middle East had persuaded Wavell, on 11 February that a military intervention in either Greece or Turkey at this time would be unsound. Notwithstanding this sound appreciation of the military situation, by the next day Wavell had completely changed his mind. Chink arrived at HQ Cairo on 12 February, having been sent there by O'Connor who had heard nothing from Wavell and wanted desperately to know what plans Wavell had for him. On entering Wavell's map room Chink 'saw to his dismay that all the desert maps had gone, replaced by maps of Greece. Wavell swept an arm sardonically at the new maps. You see Eric, he said, I'm starting my spring campaign'.<sup>454</sup> Wavell, literally overnight, had withdrawn his limited support for the pursuit in Libya and substituted it with his wholehearted support for the Greek adventure. 'Wavell whose eyes had long been fixed on the Balkans and who never thought North Africa of vital importance, was giving his support to Anthony Eden's wish to send the most powerful force which could be raised across the Mediterranean'.<sup>455</sup>

---

<sup>453</sup> Schofield, p. 171.

<sup>454</sup> Barnett, p. 58.

<sup>455</sup> Keegan, Pitt, in, *Churchill's Generals*, p. 197.

Wavell, it has to be said, never claimed that the instructions given to him by Churchill or Eden were his chief motivation for halting the advance on Tripoli, although it is difficult to come to any other conclusion when the evidence is scrutinised. Wavell's decision to halt the advance in Cyrenaica was based, so he later claimed, on the fact that his logistic resources were inadequate to support an advance. Moreover, this lack of resources would be made even worse if he went to Greece and /or Turkey. He could not, he claimed, support two, Libya and Europe, three if we count the offensive in East Africa, campaigns simultaneously with the resources he then had available.

Consequently O'Connor would have to curtail his advance. Wavell's reasoning in this regard has been supported by several authors a typical example being the official historian of the RASC. The author of the RASC history tells us that the advance could not have been continued because; 'even if we disregard the fact that Rommel and the Afrika Korps were even then on the way, and that the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured and 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions were almost exhausted, there were simply not enough lorries or the men to drive them in order to maintain any appreciable force forward of the limits already reached'.<sup>456</sup>

This appreciation, that it was not possible to go on to Tripoli for logistic reasons, is on the face of it reasonable and seems to rule out any possibility of continuing the advance.<sup>457</sup> Unfortunately, as with many events surrounding Wavell's campaigns in the Middle East, all is not what it seems. It must be remembered that when many of the official histories were written, the RASC account for example being 1954/55, few official papers were available to historians or researchers. Therefore many of the conclusions reached about what was possible and what was not possible were based on information either elicited from people who were there at the time, Wavell for example, or from the documents, letters and newspapers articles which were already in the public

---

<sup>456</sup> The Institute of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 113.

<sup>457</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 195.

domain. However, with the advantage of official papers and more detailed memoirs published in later years a clearer picture of what was possible emerges. As we shall now see the arguments put up by Wavell and others, such as the RASC official historian, are less than convincing. Indeed their primary claims that logistics and the weariness of the troops would have prevented O'Connor from capturing Tripoli, are at best, questionable, and in most cases are found to be completely without foundation.

## THE OPPOSITION & TIMING

The opportunity to carry on to Tripoli was, it must be remembered, presented in early February before any German and few Italian reinforcements had even landed in Tripoli. According to *The Rommel Papers*, Rommel, who landed in Tripoli on 12 February, felt that; if O'Connor's army had pressed on to Tripoli all it 'would have been obstructed by was some blown-up bridges over the wadis and some mines, and an artillery rearguard at Sirte. There was a heterogeneous array of Italians at Homs and the remaining Italians were moving into the defences in front of Tripoli'.<sup>458</sup> Indeed it will be remembered that when British units, such as the armoured cars of 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars, pushed on to El Agheila and then some fifty miles beyond into Tripolitania they met no opposition.<sup>459</sup>

In military terms therefore we may speculate that O'Connor's army of two fully motorised divisions had more than enough military muscle to defeat any Italian forces still left in Libya. As for the Germans "even then" preparing to come to Libya, they were doing just that, preparing; they had not arrived and although some infantry and anti-tank gunners arrived in mid February the tanks did not arrive until the second week of March. 'The first combat troops of DAK to arrive in Tripoli were Major Baron von Wechmar's Reconnaissance Battalion (Aufklarungsabteilung 3 (mot)) and Major Jansa's Anti-Tank Battalion (Panzajagerabteilung 39 (mot), both of 5 Leichte Division,

---

<sup>458</sup> Woolcombe, p. 88.

<sup>459</sup> Carver, p. 61.

who arrived by sea on 14 February. Next to arrive in Tripoli was Panzer Regiment 5, who completed their disembarkation on 8-10 March'.<sup>460</sup>

Moreover, even when they did arrive the troops and vehicles of the Deutsches Afrika-Korps had to be made desert worthy. 'Wholly unaccustomed to desert warfare as they were, the Germans faced problems that reflected their lack of experience. Their diet, for example, was unsuited to the African heat, its fat-content being too high'.<sup>461</sup> German vehicles were also not suited to desert conditions. They were far from immune to the wear and tear inflicted on them by the heat and sand of the desert. 'German engines, especially those of motor cycles, tended to overheat and stall. Tank engines also suffered, their life being reduced from 1,400-1,600 miles to only 300-900'.<sup>462</sup> The rate of mechanical attrition of the Panzer units was truly debilitating, of 'the 65 Pz.Kpfw.111 and gr. Pz.Bef.Wg. 44 fell out during the desert march because of severer damage to the engines'.<sup>463</sup>

## **MILITARY LOGISTICS**

O'Connor's forces were also far from being unable to advance to Tripoli through lack of supplies. His supply situation was particularly strong at this time. He had just captured the ports of Tobruk and Benghazi which, as will be seen, could and were used to bring bulk stores forward by sea. Furthermore, he had only recently captured thousands of tons of food and fuel. Moreover, he had captured over 700 trucks in Tobruk and over 1,500 in the ten mile long convoy which had recently belonged to the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Army at Beda Fomm.

Many new units of every kind, fighting and logistic, had also arrived in Egypt in quantity during the three months since the offensive had begun as had thousands of new

---

<sup>460</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, pp. 114/115.

<sup>461</sup> Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, p. 183.

<sup>462</sup> *ibid*, p. 183.

<sup>463</sup> Thomas L. Jentz, *Panzer Truppen* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1996) p.180.

vehicles. Wavell received from the U.S. alone, between January and April 1941, 5,865 trucks.<sup>464</sup> The 11 July, 1941, Cabinet Report on the action of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division in March and April 1941 says that it seems extraordinary that vehicles should not have been supplied for deployment to the Western Desert 'at a time when no fewer than 8,800 lorries were being embarked for Greece'.<sup>465</sup>

Moreover, and it must be stressed, that although the many vehicles earmarked for Greece would be desperately needed to evacuate the troops when the fighting started in April, the majority of these new vehicles were not deployed until late March or early April. Consequently the dispatch of say 500 3-ton lorries, from the pool in the Delta to the Western Desert which would have greatly assist O'Connor in his February push on Tripoli, would not have had a significantly detrimental effect, probably no effect at all, on April operations in Greece.

Furthermore, new units were reaching the Middle East in an almost continuous stream throughout 1941. The Norfolk Yeomanry, an anti-tank gun regiment, arrived on 16 February.<sup>466</sup> The 50<sup>th</sup> Northumbrian Division departed the UK for the Middle East in April.<sup>467</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Army Tank Brigade on 13 June<sup>468</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Durham Light Infantry on 8 July<sup>469</sup>. As mentioned earlier Wavell was receiving on average 1,000 men with a matching tonnage of equipment, vehicles and stores every day.<sup>470</sup>

As for the Australian 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division being exhausted this claim is extremely difficult to reconcile with the known facts of their deployment. The Australians had, in fact, at this time only been in the desert for just over four weeks. They had sustained relatively light casualties in their attacks on Bardia (456 killed, wounded and missing)

---

<sup>464</sup> Jackson, p. 98.

<sup>465</sup> CAB Report 66/17/32 National Archive Kew

<sup>466</sup> Jeremy Bastin, *The Norfolk Yeomanry in Peace and War* (Fakenham: The Iceni Press, 1986) p. 113.

<sup>467</sup> Geoffrey Powell, *The History of the Green Howards* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1992) p. 192. See also Charles Whiting & Eric Taylor, *Fighting Tykes* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1993)

<sup>468</sup> Crow, p. 45.

<sup>469</sup> P. J. Lewis & I. R. English, *Into Battle with the Durham's* (London: The London Stamp Exchange, 1990) p. 44.

<sup>470</sup> Jackson, pp. 28/29.

and Tobruk (49 dead and 306 wounded) and these losses were rapidly being made good from reserves in the Delta.<sup>471</sup> In reality the Australian division was now because of all the captured stores, vehicles and weapons it had acquired, stronger than when it had deployed to the desert in January. Moreover, their removal from the desert was not to give them a rest period in the Delta but to prepare them for active service in Greece.<sup>472</sup>

Artillery units were also plentiful as even more had been sent forward. At the start of Operation *Compass* O'Connor's divisions had between them approximately 120 artillery pieces. By the time they reach Beda Fomm, even though several regiments had been sent to the Sudan, they had 166 guns available.<sup>473</sup> As for the artillery units in the forward areas being incapable of making the 450 mile journey, or only the 350 mile journey for units in the very forward areas, to Tripoli, we know that they were more than able to cover these distances. When the advance was halted at Beda Fomm many of the artillery units involved in the battle turned round and drove the 500 miles back to the railhead at Mersa Matruh in their own trucks. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Royal Horse Artillery went even further they drove the whole 1000 miles back to the Delta.<sup>474</sup>

The units of 7AD, although most of their surviving tanks were much worn, still had more than enough track and engine life remaining in the majority of their tanks and armoured cars to get them to Tripoli. Indeed many of the Cruisers of 7AD were to trundle the 650 kilometres of road back to Mersa Matruh on their own tracks. It was without doubt an enormous waste'.<sup>475</sup> In regard to armour being made available to reinforce 7AD this was also available in some quantity. There were the two regiments of tanks of 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Brigade sitting idle in the Delta. These were at this time being made ready for Greece, but were not deployed until March, and could easily therefore

---

<sup>471</sup> Raugh, p. 115.

<sup>472</sup> Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The War in the Desert* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) p. 47.

<sup>473</sup> Bidwell, Figures taken from *Gunnery at War*, pages 145 and 150.

<sup>474</sup> J. H. Dey, *Cairo to Berlin The 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery 1939-1945* (Fleet: Arcturus Press, 2005) p. 9.

<sup>475</sup> Heckmann, p. 92.



have been sent up to the desert front. Also there were the 52 cruisers of 5 RTR which were already in the forward area at Tobruk. It is true that approximately half the tanks in this regiment were in need of overhaul and had very worn engines. Nonetheless, the other half were perfectly serviceable and with careful management and maintenance many of the worn tanks might well have been made serviceable. Drew, the commanding officer of 5 RTR, had, in fact, already ordered forward a number of new engines for his tanks.<sup>476</sup> Had their arrival been given greater priority then even more tanks in this regiment might have been made serviceable.

Also uncommitted were the remains of 7 RTR and their Matilda tanks. 7 RTR which had started *Compass* with a compliment of 50 tanks, was in February 1941, in Tobruk with about 20 remaining tanks the other 30 being left at various locations between Sidi Barrani and Tobruk. Brigadier Harding had made it his duty to try and keep as many of these valuable assets in action as long as he possibly could. He had brought 'all the resources of the staff together to see that as many as possible of the Matilda's were available for each successive operation'.<sup>477</sup> By the time of the Tobruk attack 'by dint of extremely hard work eighteen tanks were, in point of fact, got ready and took part in the battle'.<sup>478</sup>

While there may be debate over the ability of some units to continue the fight there is no ambiguity over 7 RTRs ability to fight on. After Tobruk fell and most of the tanks returned to the Delta four Matilda tanks remained in the town and were pressed into service when the port was besieged in April. Also interestingly many Matildas of this Regiment were to find themselves in battle in the very near future anyway. As they were returned to Egypt they were allocated to various tasks. In early April six were sent

---

<sup>476</sup> War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

<sup>477</sup> Carver, p. 63.

<sup>478</sup> Active Service, p. 19.

to Crete.<sup>479</sup> On 19 April, when Tobruk was surrounded, six 'A Lighters' brought eight Matilda tanks of 'D' Squadron 7 RTR back into the port.<sup>480</sup>

There were in February 1941, somewhere in the region of twenty five Matildas available in the forward areas. Furthermore, had the advance been continued there was no reason why, with 'A Lighters' available, the serviceable Matildas in Tobruk, rather than being shipped back to the Delta, could not have been shipped forward to one of the many small ports on the Gulf of Sirte such as Misurata or Buerat. A possibility O'Connor himself identified. If this had been done not only would it have saved engine and track life but it would have placed them within less than 100 miles of Tripoli. Moreover, aside from the availability of the cruisers of 5 RTR and the 25 or so Matildas of 7 RTR there was also the 1 KDGs with 50 new Marmon Harrington armoured cars. Indeed to quote Brigadier Barclay who made a thorough study of Operation *Compass*; 'There may have been good reasons for abandoning the North African offensive in favour of the Greek venture; but the condition of units in XIII Corps [7AD and 6 AID] was not one of them'.<sup>481</sup>

## **THE NAVY AND RAF**

Admiral Cunningham, the naval C-in-C, certainly thought that supporting a drive on Tripoli, although it would be difficult and might involve heavy casualties, was not beyond his navies capabilities. When he heard that the offensive had been stopped Cunningham wrote that 'he was most bitterly disappointed at the turn this Libyan campaign has taken and continued I don't know the reason. I know it was not due to any naval shortcomings'.<sup>482</sup> Cunningham went on to confirm that his navy 'had just landed 2,500 tons of petrol and over 3,000 tons of other stores at Benghazi and had doubled the

---

<sup>479</sup> Fletcher, p. 77.

<sup>480</sup> Harrison, p. 73.

<sup>481</sup> Baynes, p. 126.

<sup>482</sup> Raugh, p. 123.

amount it had guaranteed to land daily at Tobruk'.<sup>483</sup> Cunningham was now confident that he could land approximately 2,600 tons of general supplies 700 tons of cased petrol, and 150 personnel, per day, at Tobruk alone.

The RAF could certainly have supported the advance if it had been ordered to do so. The RAF squadrons following up the advance quickly made use of the many excellent Italian airfields the army captured. At Agedabia, for example, which was a major Italian air force maintenance centre; the lavish base facilities were captured almost intact.<sup>484</sup> The Officers' Mess was a large and well-equipped underground room dug out of the rock. 'Approached by a curving stairway, this extraordinary chamber had been found in good order, properly ventilated and complete with wiring and electric light'.<sup>485</sup> Facilities such as those detailed above were to be found at Italian airfields all along the Libyan coast. As for the scale of the losses imposed on the Italian Air Force by the end of Operation *Compass* these were truly staggering. 'The Regia Aeronautica had lost fifty-eight aircraft in action and ninety-one intact and 1,000 damaged were captured'.<sup>486</sup> O'Connor was so pleased with the RAF's contribution so far that he sent Collishaw, the commander of No. 202 Group, a congratulatory message:

Since the war began you have consistently attacked without intermission an enemy air force five and ten times your strength, dealing him blow after blow, until finally he was driven out of the sky, and out of Libya, leaving hundreds of derelict air-craft on his aerodromes. In his recent retreat from Tobruk you gave his ground troops no rest, bombing concentrations, and carrying out low flying attacks on their MT columns. In addition to the above you have co-operated to the full in carrying out our many requests for special bombardments, reconnaissance's, and protection against enemy air action, and I would like to say how much all this has contributed to our success.<sup>487</sup>

---

<sup>483</sup> *ibid*

<sup>484</sup> Cull, p. 74.

<sup>485</sup> *ibid*, p. 74.

<sup>486</sup> Bickers, p. 49.

<sup>487</sup> *ibid*, p. 49.

The only reason the RAF did not continue in the same vain was because the squadrons operating with the army were mostly withdrawn and eventually sent to Greece.

### **PRELUDE TO DISASTER: ADVANCE TURNS TO DEFENCE**

Nonetheless, regardless of how feasible his fellow commanders thought continuing the pursuit might be Wavell persuaded himself that other options should be pursued. 'On 13<sup>th</sup> February, O'Connor and Wilson learned that their campaign was, for the time being, at an end'.<sup>488</sup> Despite the masses of new trucks, tanks and supplies coming into Egypt and the huge stock piles of captured Italian stores Wavell ignored the obvious advantages of going on to Tripoli for the illusion of helping Greece. John Combe felt that sending troops to Greece 'denied the inevitable capture of Tripoli in February and so of imposing at least a long delay in the Germans arriving in North Africa'.<sup>489</sup> As Kenneth Macksey says in *Military Errors of World War Two*:

If Wavell appreciated the importance of seizing the entire North-African shore, re-opening the Mediterranean to British shipping and thus contriving a vast saving of vital carrying capacity by obviating the need to send everything to and from the Middle East round the Cape of Good Hope, he gave no pronounced sign of it. Indeed, he did not even bother to visit the Western Desert Force to see for himself. Wavell's decision to relegate North Africa to a subsidiary role in favour of an entry into the Balkans may be adjudged a strategic error of the first magnitude which had a profound effect upon the future course of the war.<sup>490</sup>

For the British the war in Libya would now take on a purely defensive nature. To accommodate this new situation Wilson set about consolidating his gains and organising his defence of Cyrenaica. He started by setting up his military headquarters at Barce in the luxurious barracks vacated by the Italians.<sup>491</sup> For his own comfort while in Barce he took a room in the luxurious Hotel Moderna whose Italian manager had been the

---

<sup>488</sup> Barnett, p. 62.

<sup>489</sup> Liddell Hart Centre Doc 4/3/26 Comment by Brigadier John Combe dated 28-05-1941 on performance of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division after battle of Brega.

<sup>490</sup> Macksey, pp. 74/75.

<sup>491</sup> Wilson, p. 63.

assistant manager of a hotel in Oxford.<sup>492</sup> From his base in Barce Wilson toured the area visiting all the main centres of habitation. His motive for this inspection was to, as he puts it, 'get an idea as to the suitability of that part of the country for defence against attack from Tripoli'.<sup>493</sup> Wilson realised, even at this early stage, that although the Italians were beaten they might regroup and counterattack him.

Wilson had ample mobile forces available under his direct supervision to defend his command area. 7AD<sup>494</sup> had its two armoured brigades the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> each of two armoured regiments equipped with cruiser and light tanks. Also, as mentioned, there was a heavy tank regiment, 7 RTR,<sup>495</sup> re-equipping in Tobruk. Added to this tank force he had for reconnaissance the vastly experienced 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars and the less experienced, although learning quickly, 1<sup>st</sup> Kings Dragoon Guards in their armoured cars.<sup>496</sup> In artillery he was particularly strong having the 1<sup>st</sup><sup>497</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> 104<sup>th</sup><sup>498</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Royal Horse Artillery Regiments with sixteen 25-pdr guns each. He also had the 3<sup>rd</sup> RHA with 2 pdr and Bofors anti-tank guns<sup>499</sup> and the 51<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment RA with a mix of 18-pdr and 4.5-inch guns which were supporting 6 AID on the escarpment above Benghazi. In heavier artillery he had the 7<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment RA with 8 6-inch guns and 8 60-pdr gun howitzers and the 64<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment RA with 16 4.5-inch guns. All these artillery regiments were, as we have seen, mobile and though in need of a certain amount of rest and re-equipment were ready for action.

Virtually all his armoured forces, it is true, had fought hard and travelled a long way and many were very badly worn and in need of serious maintenance. However, although the units in the forward areas were depleted and needed maintenance, they were intact.

---

<sup>492</sup> *ibid*, p. 62.

<sup>493</sup> *ibid*, p. 63.

<sup>494</sup> Mark Bevis, *British and Commonwealth Armies 1939-45 Volume 1* (Solihull: Helion & Co, 2005) pp. 24/25. Bevis gives full breakdown of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division and ancillary units February March 1941.

<sup>495</sup> War Diary 7 RTR WO 169/1416

<sup>496</sup> Verney, p. 48.

<sup>497</sup> War Diary 1 RHA WO 169/ 1426

<sup>498</sup> War Diary 104 RHA WO 169/1431

<sup>499</sup> War Diary 3 RHA WO 169/1428

Consequently, now that operations had finished for the time being, Wilson no doubt expected these forces would be brought up to fighting strength in equipment and men as quickly as both became available.

Wilson's command was experienced, had reasonable communications equipment, adequate transport and was building a reserve of supplies. His men had been bloodied in battle and their moral was sky high. Their leaders had gained knowledge that only action could buy. The troops had confidence in themselves and their officers. Their equipment, tanks and guns were worn but had worked well.<sup>500</sup> The areas which needed improvement had been identified and there seemed nothing that could not be sorted. As for the presence of the enemy; all seemed quiet on the western front.

## **THE WIND OF CHANGE**

In mid February Wilson received information which informed him what forces he should have for holding Cyrenaica in the future.<sup>501</sup> There would for the foreseeable future be no further advances so the area was to be stabilised and the battlefield cleared of any useful weapons and equipment. To achieve this objective he would keep 6 AID for the time being and receive the Australian Corps Headquarters with General Blamey in command.<sup>502</sup> The intention was in the near future to move forward the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions to replace the 6 AID. The retention of 6 AID in the forward areas was to be only a temporary measure as they had been earmarked for operations against an Italian occupied Greek island. 7AD would return to Egypt to rest and refit. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division (2AD) would come forward and take its place. It all sounded very plausible.

To achieve these new dispositions there now started a most bewildering movement of men and machines up and down the desert road. From Cyrenaica to Cairo thousands

---

<sup>500</sup> Fernyhough, p. 118.

<sup>501</sup> Wilson, p. 64.

<sup>502</sup> Connell, p. 383.

of troops and their equipment were on the move west and east. Among the first units to leave the forward areas were the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars.<sup>503</sup> They handed over to the 1 Kings Dragoon Guards on 13 February and prepared to head back to Cairo.<sup>504</sup>

On 18 February most of 7AD, including 11H, began their long march back to Cairo. Most of the support elements, with the exception of the Light Aid Detachment which remained in the forward area, returned in their trucks. The Hussars arrived back in Cairo on 22 February.<sup>505</sup> The 920-mile journey took them six and a half days to complete. Their return from the desert was made in a very orderly fashion and they returned with all their remaining armoured cars and support vehicles in reasonable condition. Their war diary proudly boasts how few breakdowns the squadrons had on their return trip to Cairo.<sup>506</sup>

The remaining tanks of 7AD, however, did not make the journey back to Cairo on their tracks. Woollcombe suggests that all the tanks in the forward areas worth salvaging were sent back to Egypt by sea from Benghazi, and that all tanks that could still give battle remained in Cyrenaica.<sup>507</sup> This statement it has to be said is far from accurate. Some tanks may have been embarked in Benghazi but not many; the majority were driven back to Tobruk and embarked there. Some were even driven all the way back to Mersa Matruh and sent back by train. As for all tanks that could still give battle being left in the forward areas this is completely untrue. All the British cruiser tanks whether they were still battle worthy or not, were, in one way or another, sent back to the Delta.<sup>508</sup> The only British tanks left in the forward areas were the light tanks belonging to 3H and the light tanks discarded by departing regiments.

---

<sup>503</sup> Verney, p. 48.

<sup>504</sup> War Diary 1 KDG WO 169/1384

<sup>505</sup> Woollcombe, p. 85.

<sup>506</sup> War Diary 11 Hussars WO 169/1390

<sup>507</sup> Woollcombe, p. 85.

<sup>508</sup> War Diary 2 RTR WO 169/1410

Woollcombe has this to say about this move; 'it was unfortunate that the veteran armoured car regiment 11H and Support Group could not have been retained, for after the Germans attacked these units had to be hastened all the way up again from Egypt'.<sup>509</sup> The same may be said of the return of the battle worthy cruiser tanks. Their departure for the Delta left virtually no cruiser tanks in the forward area. This degree of emasculation, as we shall see later, had serious consequences when the Germans attacked.

### **WAVELL'S GREEK TRAGEDY:**

When discussing military genius in chapter three of *On War*, Clausewitz makes reference to military intelligence stating that; '*Average intelligence may recognise the truth occasionally, and exceptional courage may now and then retrieve a blunder; but usually intellectual inadequacy will be shown up by indifferent achievement*'. Perhaps, no other military adventure more accurately proves Clausewitz's words to be correct than Wavell's decision to send forces to Greece. *On War*.<sup>510</sup>

While Wilson's strategy for holding the "Desert Flank" remained unchanged, wider Middle Eastern strategy was about to undergo radical change. As already mentioned when Wavell received the 11 February cable from London ordering him to consider operations in Greece and/or Turkey as his next priority he was at first very sceptical about undertaking such operations. Not, perhaps, surprisingly, in view of the obvious military problems of sending troops back to mainland Europe, Wavell considered such operations to be impractical and dangerous in several respects.<sup>511</sup> Turkey, for example was ruled out as she was not even at war with either Italy or Germany. Moreover, the Turks steadfastly refused to become involved in the war unless directly attacked; therefore this negated meaningful cooperation with the Turks.

---

<sup>509</sup> Woollcombe, p. 85.

<sup>510</sup> Clausewitz, p. 101.

<sup>511</sup> Connell, p. 336. Wavell felt that sending troops to Greece would entail 'considerable risks, including military defeat, wastage of shipping, and weakening of the power to resist an enemy counter attack in Cyrenaica'.



Consequently if Britain wanted to get back into Europe it would have to be through Greece. The Italians had invaded Greece in late October 1940 and it had been felt for sometime, by London and in particular by Churchill, that by helping the Greeks the British might regain a foothold on mainland Europe. The plan therefore was to send as large a force as Wavell could muster to help the Greeks. This decision, to send substantial forces to Greece instead of continuing the pursuit of the retreating Italians and capturing Tripoli, was seen at the time, as mentioned, to be highly dubious. Indeed it has come to be seen in more recent times, by many commentators, to have been the height of military folly. 'The preparations for *Lustre* (the code name for the Greek expedition) went forward in what Alan Moorhead called "the hope that precedes adventure," rather than after sober military calculation'.<sup>512</sup>

Major General Sir Francis De Guingand who at the time of the Greek adventure was on Wavell's planning staff had this to say about the opportunity that he felt was lost by going to Greece: 'The prize was great [taking Tripoli]. It would mean that we should be in a position to avoid further major campaigns in North Africa. We would be able to link up with the French in Tunis, which might well lead to active collaboration. The shipping route through the Mediterranean might be kept open without great difficulty'.<sup>513</sup> De Guingand's thoughts on this subject are echoed by many others such as General William Jackson<sup>514</sup> and Liddell-Hart.<sup>515</sup>

The obvious advantages in taking Tripoli had, it might be remembered, been identified by Wavell himself. In the appraisal he wrote just before he arrived to take up his command in the Middle East Wavell set out what the primary objectives in North Africa should be: 'The last war was won in the West [he wrote]...The next war will be

---

<sup>512</sup> Bennett, p. 32.

<sup>513</sup> de Guingand, p. 47.

<sup>514</sup> Jackson, p. 75.

<sup>515</sup> Liddell-Hart p. 131.

won or lost in the Mediterranean; and the longer it takes us to secure effective control of the Mediterranean, the harder will be the winning of the war'.<sup>516</sup>

Moreover, the arguments against going to Greece, alluded to above, were not the only reasons for avoiding the operation. It had serious and potentially hugely damaging consequences for the whole British war effort. In order to transport all the troops and their equipment to Greece 'fifty ships had to be withdrawn from convoys as they reached Suez and passed through the Suez Canal as and when German mining allowed. This was done at the expense of the import of supplies to the United Kingdom and to the flow of reinforcements to the Middle East'.<sup>517</sup> Furthermore, a good part of the Mediterranean fleet was employed on escort duty for these transports and many ships of the fleet were either damaged or sunk.

However, despite his own sound reasoning and the perfectly sensible military appreciation arrived at by people like de Guingand, Jackson and Moorhead Wavell still forged ahead with his Greek tragedy. He ignored the damage the huge diversion of valuable and irreplaceable shipping, and possible loss of irreplaceable military resources, would have on his command.

So the question might fairly be asked, if sending troops to Greece was such an obviously bad idea (just like the removal of 4 IID earlier) and also so potentially, and in fact was, nearly fatally damaging to British war aims, why did Wavell send them? To answer this question we must look to the origins of the Greek adventure and again at Wavell's peculiar personality.

Italian intervention in the Balkans began on 7 April 1939, when Italian troops disembarked at Durazzo and other ports on the Albanian coast.<sup>518</sup> These forces quickly moved on to occupy the whole of Albania. The British and French Governments,

---

<sup>516</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 21

<sup>517</sup> Jackson, p. 83.

<sup>518</sup> I. O. S. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East* (London: HMSO, 1956) p. 24.

fearing that Greece might be next, promptly offered Greece military assistance should she be threatened. 'Within a week of the Italian landings in Albania, the British and French announced that they had promised to give all the help in their power if Greek or Rumanian independence were threatened and if the Greek or Rumanian Government considered it vital to resist'.<sup>519</sup> The Italians, however, did not immediately attack the Greeks, as with their later attack on the British in Egypt they waited until the French were knocked out of the war before striking.

It was not until 28 October 1940, the eighteenth anniversary of his march on Rome, that Mussolini invaded Greece from Albania.<sup>520</sup> Mussolini was tired of always seeming to trail behind his German ally. Consequently he decided to invade Greece as a way of demonstrating to Hitler that he too was the master of his own destiny. 'Hitler always faces me with a *fait accompli* he announced to his immediate entourage. This time I am going to pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the papers that I have occupied Greece'.<sup>521</sup> The Italian invasion might, however, have satisfied Mussolini's vanity but it gave Churchill's Government a difficult choice. They now had to decide whether they should go to the aid of the Greeks or stay out of the Balkans. The pledge to help Greece was after all 'given by Neville Chamberlain's Government; Churchill's Government [however] never repudiated it. France collapsed; Rumania declared neutrality; but so far as Britain was concerned [more probably Churchill] the guarantee to Greece was still binding'.<sup>522</sup>

When Churchill received the news of the invasion he was delighted. 'Churchill's reaction was predictable and almost immediate. We will give you all the help in our power! he cabled the Greek Government'.<sup>523</sup> The Italian attack brought Greece into

---

<sup>519</sup> *ibid*, pp. 24/25.

<sup>520</sup> Ireland, p. 48.

<sup>521</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p.72.

<sup>522</sup> Connell, p. 330.

<sup>523</sup> Pitt, *Crucible*, 1980, p.73.

the war on the British side and at that moment Britain and Churchill needed all the allies they could get. 'Hitherto we had not committed ourselves [Churchill wrote] to the Greek adventure, except by continuous large-scale preparations in Egypt, and by the discussions and agreements at Athens'.<sup>524</sup> Now that they had been invaded the Greeks were more willing to accept British help and Churchill was only too happy to oblige.

Churchill saw the invasion as an opportunity to get British troops back onto the mainland of Europe with the added possibility of enticing other states in the region to join Britain and Greece in the fighting. In 1948 Churchill clarified where he hoped the Greek adventure might lead, 'I wanted to form a Balkan front. I wanted Yugoslavia, and hoped for Turkey. That, with Greece, would have given us fifty divisions. A nut for the Germans to crack'.<sup>525</sup>

The problem for the British, however, was that at the time of the invasion they were militarily stretched, in several directions virtually to the limit of their resources. Consequently the ability of HQ in Cairo to find extra resources for Greece was almost impossible. Nonetheless, a promise had been made and Wavell was ordered to send what he could spare to help the Greeks. In November 1940 orders were sent to Wavell from London, which started the 'movement to airfields near Athens of several bomber and fighter squadrons from the Desert Air Force, together with their necessary equipment and ground crews'.<sup>526</sup> Longmore viewed this order with considerable misgivings but attempted to comply with it as best he could. He immediately sent a 'mixed Blenheim squadron (No. 30) of bombers and fighters. Churchill told him: "You have taken a very bold and wise decision".<sup>527</sup>

The RAF contribution could, in any case, not at this time be any larger as there were not enough serviceable airfields in Greece for them to operate from. There was, in fact,

---

<sup>524</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War Vol III*, p. 83.

<sup>525</sup> Connell, p. 330.

<sup>526</sup> Lewin, p 82.

<sup>527</sup> John Terraine, *The Right of the Line* (London: Sceptre Books, 1988) p. 327.

‘not a single all-weather aerodrome in existence on the mainland of Greece; and the possibilities of airfield construction were restricted by an unhappy combination of weather and politics’.<sup>528</sup> The weather throughout the winter of 1940/41 was extremely wet and cold in northern Greece making the construction of airfields very slow and difficult. Nonetheless despite these limitations ‘during November two more squadrons of Blenheim bombers (Nos. 84 and 211) and a Gladiator squadron (No. 80) followed, with a further Gladiator squadron (No. 112) in December’.<sup>529</sup>

These air deployments were soon followed by limited army deployments and ‘by mid November the Army had also dispatched from North Africa over 2000 men and 400 vehicles (from forty different units) to provide engineers, signallers, supply facilities and anti-aircraft defence’.<sup>530</sup> These British deployments and the badly organised Italian attack coupled with the unexpectedly rapid mobilisation of the Greek resistance slowed and eventually halted the Italian attack. The initial Italian successes were ‘driven back by a series of spirited Greek counter-attacks. But these, and the winter campaigns which followed, cost the Greek Army dear. Its determination to hold the Italians remained high, but, unaided; it was in no condition to resist a new attack from another quarter’.<sup>531</sup>

Unfortunately for the Greeks, by January 1941, London was receiving mounting evidence which suggested this was about to happen. Increasingly intelligence was indicating that the Germans were becoming interested in attacking Greece sooner rather than later. Churchill took this evidence very seriously and wrote on 6 January ‘nothing would suit our interests better than that any German advance in the Balkans should be delayed to the spring. For this very reason we must apprehend that it will begin

---

<sup>528</sup> Guedalla, p. 114.

<sup>529</sup> Terraine, p. 327.

<sup>530</sup> Lewin, p. 82.

<sup>531</sup> Fraser, p. 131.

earlier'.<sup>532</sup> Churchill's fears were confirmed very quickly by Enigma. On 9 January further intelligence reports confirmed that GAF units were moving into Bulgaria with instruction to lay telegraph lines from Bulgaria to the Greek border along the natural line of advance to Salonika.<sup>533</sup> On 10 January London cabled Middle East Command instructing them to send as much assistance as possible to the Greeks.<sup>534</sup> The cable then went on to dictate to Wavell what forces they expected him to send. He must send to Greece 'tanks (both infantry and cruiser), anti-tank and anti-aircraft equipment, two medium regiments of artillery and more RAF squadrons'.<sup>535</sup>

Wavell, upon receiving this news, in an unusual for him demonstration of military reality, cabled Dill the same day: 'German concentration is more war of nerves designed with object of helping Italy by upsetting Greeks nerves, inducing us to disperse our forces in the Middle East and to stop our advance in Libya. Nothing we can do from here is likely to be in time to stop German advance if really intended, it will lead to most dangerous dispersion of force and is playing the enemy's game'.<sup>536</sup>

When Churchill read Wavell's cable indicating that he was, at least at this juncture, against the Greek adventure and wanted to continue the advance in Libya Churchill 'reacted venomously: Our information contradicts idea that German concentration in Rumania is merely move in war of nerves or bluff to cause dispersion of force. Nothing must hamper capture of Tobruk but thereafter all operations in Libya are subordinate to aiding Greece'.<sup>537</sup> The next day Churchill put some further urgency into his direction to Wavell to send aid to Greece as soon as he could. Churchill informed Wavell that detailed information had been received in London, which showed 'continual passage of

---

<sup>532</sup> Hinsley, p. 353.

<sup>533</sup> *ibid*

<sup>534</sup> Lewin, p 82.

<sup>535</sup> *ibid*

<sup>536</sup> Jackson, p. 61.

<sup>537</sup> *ibid*

troops to Rumania, movements of signals and other advanced agents into Bulgaria, and that a large-scale movement may begin on or soon after 20<sup>th</sup> instant'.<sup>538</sup>

On receiving this cable 'Wavell made no demure. On the 13<sup>th</sup> he found himself in Athens conferring with the King of Greece, his Prime Minister, Metaxas, and the Commander-in-Chief General Papagos'.<sup>539</sup> By the end of this conference Wavell had committed the British to substantial support for the Greeks. This would inevitably result in the very thing that Wavell said was his most important objective in the Middle East, that is the complete capture of the North African coast, being put on hold. Wavell was, in fact, preparing to divert the very resources which would make this possible away from O'Connor.

However, the die had not finally been cast and there was still time to reconsider the wisdom of embarking whole-heartedly on the Greek adventure. 'Metaxas, the Greek Prime Minister, viewed the situation in the Balkans with greater realism and less emotion than Churchill. He was prepared to accept logistic help, which Wavell offered, but not fighting units'.<sup>540</sup> Metaxas wanted the British to wait until they had a convincing army ready to take to the field rather than accept a token force, which might only accelerate German aggression. Wavell showing his usual oscillation on occasions like this began to change his mind again and agreed with Metaxas that delays in deployment were probably the best solution.

Wavell duly reported his new thoughts on the Greek deployment to London: 'Present proposal is a dangerous half-measure. I do not believe that troops it is proposed to send are sufficient to enable the equivalent of three Greek divisions to hold Salonika if the Germans are really determined to advance on it'.<sup>541</sup> This information, although he was not privy to it, would prove to be good news for O'Connor. As nothing of military

---

<sup>538</sup> Hinsley, p. 354.

<sup>539</sup> Lewin, p 82.

<sup>540</sup> Jackson, p. 62.

<sup>541</sup> *ibid*

significance had left the desert fighting at this time O'Connor was able to take Tobruk and contemplate a further advance on Benghazi. 'Metaxas had temporarily saved Wavell's Western Desert campaign. Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff were forced to accept his verdict'.<sup>542</sup>

Nonetheless, the momentum to send forces to Greece was soon back at work. Although the Greeks had refused British help Churchill still felt British forces might be needed in the future. On 20 January the Defence Committee in London cable Wavell instructing him that he should 'build up a mobile reserve in Egypt for possible use in Greece or Turkey within the next two months'.<sup>543</sup> Moreover, on 29 January Portal informed Longmore that he should be ready to send 10-15 squadrons to Turkey. 'His reply was in character:

Your message received. Quite frankly contents astound me. I cannot believe you fully appreciate present situation Middle East, in which Libya drive in full career and Sudan offensive into Eritrea progressing satisfactorily. However strong advantages may be of impressing Turks, can you afford to lock up squadrons you propose in Turkey where they may remain for some time inoperative? Would it not be forsaking the substance for the shadow?<sup>544</sup>

To conform to Churchill's and Portal's wishes, Wavell, rather than examine the proposed Greek adventure in the detail that was required began planning a huge military deployment to Greece.<sup>545</sup> Instead of making a considered and balanced military estimation of the prospects of a successful intervention in Greece, which could only conclude that on any level any further deployment to that country would be militarily unsound, Wavell pressed on with his plans. On 10 February 1941, Wavell, cabled Dill and set out for him a redeployment timetable of forces from the Middle East to Greece.

---

<sup>542</sup> Hinsley, p. 355.

<sup>543</sup> *ibid*

<sup>544</sup> Terraine, p. 328.

<sup>545</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 217.



In this cable he also included an estimation of the forces he thought he would have available to send to Greece in the coming months.

This cable makes for interesting reading and, perhaps, shows how far out of touch with the true military situation Wavell really was. In his cable he confidently tells Dill that he could find 'one armoured brigade group and two brigades of the New Zealand Division'.<sup>546</sup> Theoretically this objective might have been feasible but in reality it was completely impossible. In both cases there were at this time insurmountable obstacles in fielding either the two New Zealand brigades or an armoured brigade group.

At that moment all the armoured regiments which had made up the brigades of 7AD were either spread around the Western Desert or starting to head back to the Delta. Moreover, wherever the armoured brigades were, none of them had a full compliment of serviceable tanks and this would be the case for many months to come. His other potential source of armoured brigade groups was the two incomplete brigades of 2AD. We shall examine the brigades of this division in some detail later in the work; however, when Wavell made his predictions to Dill it would be fair to say that neither of these brigades was in a fit state to take to the battlefield. In no sense at this time could they even remotely be considered as fully-fledged brigade groups, lacking as they did ancillary formations of virtually every kind.

As for his ability to deploy the New Zealand brigades this was in many respects even more problematical. The two New Zealand brigades did have a more or less complete set of infantry equipment and even first line transport. Unfortunately this was about all they had. They had no support units, artillery, second line transport, signals or anti-aircraft protection.<sup>547</sup> Nor at this time were some of these shortages unknown to

---

<sup>546</sup> Connell, p. 331.

<sup>547</sup> *ibid*

Wavell. Connell, indeed, confirms that Wavell knew, for example, that the New Zealanders were short of artillery and signals equipment.<sup>548</sup>

Moreover, even had these brigades been complete they could still not, at this juncture, have been deployed. Wavell, writing to Dill on 7 November 1940, observes that 'Dominion Governments are reluctant to allow their formations to be broken up in any way or to permit their use in the field until fully trained and equipped or for guards on internal security duties except in a grave emergency'.<sup>549</sup> General Bernard Freyberg the commander of all New Zealand forces in the Middle East adhered strictly to this policy. Freyberg 'insisted that the New Zealand troops must be held together, to fight as a full division, not as separate brigades'.<sup>550</sup>

This ruling, therefore, effectively excluded the two New Zealand brigades from being dispatched to fight anywhere at this time. Indeed the New Zealand Division would in fact, not be deployable until its 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade arrived in the Middle East from Britain. The 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade of 2 NZD had been previously diverted to Britain in mid 1940 when a German invasion of the UK looked likely.<sup>551</sup> Consequently 2 NZD was not fully assembled in the Middle East until well into March and did not complete its concentration in Greece until 2 April.<sup>552</sup>

However, Wavell was by no means finished with his lavish list of forces earmarked for Greece. He now went on to predict to Dill what he would have available in the near future. By the middle of March Wavell estimated that he 'could add another armoured brigade group, and another two Australian brigades. A month later he could send a further Australian brigade, and at the end of April a complete Australian division'.<sup>553</sup> In addition to all these forces for Greece an entire Australian division, the 6<sup>th</sup>, would be

---

<sup>548</sup> *ibid*, p. 333.

<sup>549</sup> Lewin, p. 40.

<sup>550</sup> Geoffrey Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles* (London: William Kimber, 1987) p. 34.

<sup>551</sup> *ibid*

<sup>552</sup> Wilson, p. 84.

<sup>553</sup> Connell, p. 331.

available for the proposed operation *Mandibles*, an adventurous scheme to capture the Dodecanese. This allocates three Australian divisions to operations in the Greek theatre. However, Wavell himself had already assigned 9 AID to the defence of Cyrenaica. Therefore, as there were only three Australian divisions in the Middle East, if he were to send three on the Greek adventure there would be none left to defend his desert flank in Cyrenaica.

As has been mentioned earlier Wavell had at this time no tanks to equip the brigades of 7AD so they could not be sent to Greece. The ramshackle armoured brigade he did cobble together and send to Greece was the newly arrived 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Brigade of 2AD. The only other armoured brigade he possessed was 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Brigade of the same division and this brigade, as we shall see later, was in no fit state to fight anybody and was, in any case, only one regiment strong. Its other two regiments, which had arrived in Egypt earlier, had already been badly worn fighting the Italians in Libya with 7AD and its tanks were now back in the Delta with all the rest. This brigade was anyway already assigned to the defence of Cyrenaica. Therefore, it was not available for Greece, even if it had been up to strength, which it most definitely was not.

Moreover, Wavell's 10 February cable created a very dangerous impression in London, indicating as it did, that his forces in the Middle East were far more numerous and capable than they actually were. Eden who had been sent by Churchill to establish whether the Greek operation was worth the risk 'should have cross-examined Wavell until he either exposed the flimsy factual basis of his recommendations or satisfied himself that *Lustre's* prospects were good enough to justify the manifest risks entailed. He plainly did neither; nor did he secure the "precise military appreciation" which Churchill demanded and which would have condemned the operation'.<sup>554</sup>

---

<sup>554</sup> Bennett, p. 34.

By early February the scale of the German commitment to a Balkan campaign was becoming evident. The intelligence being received in London revealed an alarming build up of forces far greater than anything a few British/Dominion divisions could realistically resist. By mid February this unpalatable, but undeniable, fact was starting to develop in Churchill's mind and was causing him to seriously reconsider the whole operation. Unfortunately his advisors on the ground in the Middle East, Wavell, Eden and Dill were still emphatically in favour of the operation. Eden, after a long discussion with Wavell and Dill cabled Churchill on 20 February and informed him that it had been agreed between them that Britain 'should do everything in its power to bring the fullest measure of help to the Greeks at earliest possible moment'.<sup>555</sup> Nonetheless, Churchill still had his doubts. Consequently later the same day he cabled back to Eden: 'do not consider yourselves obligated to a Greek enterprise if in your hearts you feel it will only be another Norwegian fiasco. If no good plan can be made please say so. But, of course, you know how valuable success would be'.<sup>556</sup>

Churchill wanted success in Greece, if it could be gained at reasonable cost, but he did not want another military fiasco like the one in Norway. Churchill's 20 February message gave Wavell a get out of jail free card, all that was required was that Wavell should either cancel the move altogether or at the very least slow the deployment down. There were many ways in which this could have been done without losing face the actual lack of suitable shipping for one. However, Wavell took neither of these options. Instead, for some unfathomable reason, he pressed ahead with the deployment at a breakneck pace.

Churchill, therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, despite his worries about the Greek adventure turning into a military fiasco took Wavell's deployment estimates at face value. He wrongly assumed that Wavell knew what he was doing and actually did have

---

<sup>555</sup> Eden telegram to Churchill on 20 February 1941: Cabinet papers, 65/2

<sup>556</sup> Personal and Secret', 20 February 1941: Churchill papers, 20/49.

the forces and war materials he said he had. With this reassurance that Wavell had all he needed to both secure the desert flank and send a strong expeditionary force to Greece Churchill gave Wavell the go ahead to embark on the Greek operation. The official confirmation came on 7 March and the first British troops landed in the Greek port of Piraeus on the same day.<sup>557</sup>

Wavell it is true was in a difficult position on the one hand he had Churchill pushing him to action in Greece while on the other he could clearly see the problems of going there. That being said Wavell was the C-in-C on the spot and should have made his Prime Minister cognisant with all the facts. Had he done so it is very probable, in view of Churchill's existing and well voiced doubts about the Greek operation; that he would have insisted on its cancellation. As Bickers soberly observes when reviewing the decision to send forces to Greece 'it was obvious to any intelligent person, let alone to statesmen and senior military commanders, that, facing the Luftwaffe and German tanks, they would have as much chance as a tethered goat against a tiger'.<sup>558</sup>

## **CHANGE OF PLAN IN THE DESERT**

The decision to send as strong a force as possible to help the Greek's and the concurrent decision to withdraw 7AD back to the Delta to rest and refit had a profound effect on Wilson's planned defence of Libya. As units of 7AD disappeared their place was supposed to be filled by 2AD. Now half of 2AD was to be sent to Greece. In the provision of infantry things were also about to change. 6 AID was also to be sent to Greece and in its place Wilson could expect only 9 AID. The promised 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Division (7 AID) would now also be going to Greece so he could forget any reinforcement from that direction.

---

<sup>557</sup> Fraser, pp. 133/134.

<sup>558</sup> Bickers, p. 51.

Bad as all this change of units was to Wilson's plan for the defence of Cyrenaica what happened next was even worse. The commanding officer was also leaving the area to take up command of the forces being sent to Greece. On 21 February just 14 days after assuming command in Cyrenaica Wilson was summoned to a meeting with Wavell in Cairo and told that he would be leaving the desert and going to Greece.<sup>559</sup> His command in Cyrenaica was to be handed over, as soon as possible, to General Philip Neame V. C.

### **NEAME TAKES COMMAND: THE POISONED CHALLIS**

General Philip Neame V. C. took over from Wilson on 28 February and quickly came to two conclusions. Firstly he realised that with the mounting evidence of enemy activity and build-up of both German and Italian forces, there was a strong probability that he would be attacked in the very near future.

Within a few days of my arrival at Barce, my headquarters in Cyrenaica, I had visited all my troops, the forward areas south of Agedabia, the ports of Benghazi and Derna, and the fortress port of Tobruk. From air reports and air photographs it very soon became apparent to me that large enemy forces were assembling on my front, near Agheila, and more were moving up from Tripoli. Intelligence agents brought in news of German troops near the front, and large convoys crossing the Mediterranean from Italy to Tripoli. By the middle of March, a fortnight after I took over, it was quite clear to me that a great German-Italian offensive was being prepared against Cyrenaica, and that it was imminent.<sup>560</sup>

Secondly he realised that the composition of his command was wholly inadequate to repulse them if they came.<sup>561</sup> He therefore contacted Wavell and told him exactly what extra forces he felt he required to withstand the attack he was sure, and correctly foresaw, his command would soon be subjected to. 'I put forward very clearly to G.H.Q. the poor condition of my army in training, equipment, and numbers, and repeatedly signalled my most grave deficiencies – namely, anti-tank and anti-aircraft

---

<sup>559</sup> Connell, p.338.

<sup>560</sup> Neame, p. 267.

<sup>561</sup> Lewin, p. 121.

guns, armour, air support, and M.T. – all those things, in fact, which make a modern army’.<sup>562</sup>

Wavell, however, considered the threat of attack to be far less imminent than Neame expected and ordered Neame to do what he could with the forces he had. ‘I was told that reinforcements would ultimately be sent, but that little would be available before the middle of May’.<sup>563</sup> Wavell added reassuringly that he would come and assess the danger to Cyrenaica himself as soon as he was free to do so. Michael Carver who was serving in G.H.Q. Cairo at the time considered that: ‘Wavell thought that the enemy would not be in a position to take the offensive until May at the earliest, and his orders to Neame were that if he were attacked, he was to fight a delaying action between his forward position at Mersa el Brega and Benghazi’.<sup>564</sup>

Neame’s fears, brought about by his daily reading of the intelligence which suggested most conclusively that he would be attacked in the very near future, were dismissed by Wavell. Wavell’s reading of the situation was that he had plenty of time to prepare for an attack, which, if it came at all, would not come before May. So the question might fairly be asked at this point what did Wavell know about enemy intentions, and did the evidence he had suggest that an attack was not as imminent as Neame supposed.

## **WAVELL’S VIEW: INTELLIGENCE**

When the Germans attacked Brega on 31 March Wavell claimed that poor intelligence of enemy intentions was a major contributing factor in British un-preparedness. Wavell, in fact, claimed that ‘though unconfirmed reports had been received from time to time of the preparation of German troops for dispatch to Libya and of their progress via Italy

---

<sup>562</sup> *ibid*

<sup>563</sup> *ibid*

<sup>564</sup> Carver, p. 19.

and Sicily, no definite information to justify our expecting the presence of German troops in Africa had been received up to the middle of February'.<sup>565</sup>

Moreover, he further asserted that even when evidence proved, after mid February, conclusively, that German forces were in Libya his reading of the intelligence still suggested to him that they would not attack for quite some time. Wavell 'estimated that it would be at least two months after the landing of German troops at Tripoli before they could undertake a serious offensive against Cyrenaica; and that, therefore, there was not likely to be any serious threat to our positions there before May at the earliest'.<sup>566</sup>

Wavell's defence for his un-readiness at Brega, if we take his statements recorded in the above report as fact, suggest that he made no attempt to seriously defend Cyrenaica, prior to late-February 1941, because the information he was receiving on enemy activity in Libya was so imprecise that it gave him no clear indication that the Italians and Germans were substantially reinforcing their position in Libya. After, late-February, when intelligence definitely confirmed the presence of German forces in Libya and further indicated their intention to attack British forces in Cyrenaica; he claims that he failed to establish creditable forces to defend Cyrenaica, because his interpretation of the intelligence indicated to him that the attack, if it came at all, would not come before May. He would therefore, in his opinion, have plenty of time to establish a viable defence at some future, unspecified, date. Indeed even as late as 6 March, when there was overwhelming evidence that attack was imminent, Wavell was still telling his Director of Military Intelligence, Shearer, 'that there was no real danger of counterattack before May'.<sup>567</sup>

So we may say that from Wavell's point of view poor and inadequate intelligence was a significant contributing factor in the loss of Cyrenaica. However, as we shall see,

---

<sup>565</sup> Jackson, p. 75.

<sup>566</sup> *ibid*

<sup>567</sup> Connell, p. 385.



Wavell's "lack of intelligence" defence, which he used in his September 1941 after action report, and a claim he maintained thereafter, to justify his lack of preparedness at Brega, cannot, on the evidence discovered for this work, support his claim.

Perhaps, the first point to emphasis when discussing what the British and Wavell in particular did or did not know about enemy intentions, is that Cairo and London both had access to accurate intelligence on enemy intentions. As Lewin observes in *The Chief*, 'the Germans did not descend on Africa like a bolt from the blue'.<sup>568</sup> Moreover, nor did their arrival come as any surprise to Wavell. As Lewin further observes 'all Wavell's strategic reflections since the summer of 1940 had allowed quite specifically for this contingency – a calculation, indeed, which no alert commander could have avoided'.<sup>569</sup> By September 1940 British Intelligence had firm evidence, which confirmed Wavell's earlier strategic reflections; that the Germans were indeed considering an intervention in North Africa.

Starting in September 1940 information gathered by British intelligence indicated that, a 'German advance in the Balkan direction was much less likely than a German attack on Egypt from North Africa'.<sup>570</sup> This view, that the Germans were now actively considering becoming involved in Libya, was reinforced a few weeks later when on 3 October the Cabinet in London received 'certain indications' – that the next German move would be an attack from Libya, rather than into the Balkans or through Spain'.<sup>571</sup> Indications that the Germans were preparing to send forces to Libya continued to build up throughout late 1940 and into early 1941.

The chief source of the intelligence coming to the British was the informative and accurate information gained by British Army Intelligence (AI) from reading the Italian Air Force (IAF) ciphers, which had been broken earlier in the war. These ciphers

---

<sup>568</sup> Jackson, p. 75.

<sup>569</sup> Lewin, p 117.

<sup>570</sup> Hinsley, p. 253.

<sup>571</sup> *ibid*

produced rich and reliable intelligence on virtually everything the Italians were doing both at home and in Africa. By late 1940 British AI was able to read 80 per cent of all IAF high-grade cipher signals.<sup>572</sup> Nor was this the only code to be broken by British AI from which they could gain valuable information on enemy activities. 'With the help of the German Air Force (G.A.F.) Enigma and the study of G.A.F. low-grade traffic, AI was able from January 1941 to keep an accurate tally of the build up of Germany's air power in the Mediterranean'.<sup>573</sup> This information concerning the German air build up was being read by both AI in the Middle East and by Churchill in London. By early January Churchill was becoming concerned about the build up and warned Wavell of possible German involvement in Libya. On 6 January he cabled Wavell thus: 'Time is short. I cannot believe that Hitler will not intervene'.<sup>574</sup>

Churchill's prophetic warning was not long in becoming a reality. On 10 January, Admiral Cunningham, commanding a fleet of nine British warships and the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* set out from his base in Egypt on Operation *Excess* destined for the Eastern Mediterranean. Not long after mid day a 'large formation of aircraft were sighted to the northward, and were soon overhead. They were recognised as German, three squadrons of Stukas'.<sup>575</sup> These aircraft set about Cunningham's ships damaging many of them and so severely damaging *Illustrious* that after being patched up in Malta she had to go to the U.S. for extensive repairs. This new situation, of German aircraft operating in the Mediterranean, was obviously a very serious development and was recognised as such by both Cunningham and his air force counter part Longmore. On 17 January, when Cunningham returned to Alexandria, the two senior officers met to discuss the new situation. They concluded that the Germans increasing strength in the Mediterranean indicated that they were now committed to becoming intimately

---

<sup>572</sup> *ibid*, p. 375.

<sup>573</sup> Hinsley, p. 385.

<sup>574</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 151.

<sup>575</sup> Cunningham, p. 302.

involved in the fighting. Cunningham felt that they were ‘contemplating something more important than an attack upon [British] sea communications. It rather looked as though Hitler, fearing an Italian collapse, intended to come to their assistance by starting large-scale operations in the Mediterranean’.<sup>576</sup>

In mid January German involvement in North Africa became definite when British AI confirmed that G.A.F. units were, for the first time, actually operating on Libyan soil. Confirmation that Wavell knew of this G.A.F. deployment is revealed in his 19 January signal to Dill in which he wrote: ‘against present opposition I am prepared to continue advance towards Benghazi with present air protection...but effect of German aircraft in Libya remains to be seen’.<sup>577</sup> During the next few days’ further intelligence established more accurately the extent of the German deployment.

By 26 January AI confirmed that there were 80 long-range and dive-bombers at Benina an airfield a few miles from Benghazi.<sup>578</sup> Wavell, with irrefutable evidence such as this, was now under no illusion that more Germans would be coming to Libya, it was; he assumed correctly, just a matter of when. ‘I wonder [Wavell wrote] what Hitler will do next. I rather expect a busy and difficult six months in the Eastern Mediterranean’.<sup>579</sup> For the time being, however, the Germans were unable to use their aircraft based at Benina, or anywhere else in Libya, as the successful British land offensive against the collapsing Italians had forced them to withdraw to Tripoli. This withdrawal did not, however, prevent the build-up of German air assets in Libya. Nor would it be long before they were able to commit themselves to battle.

This build up of air power, by both Italy and Germany, in Libya and on many Mediterranean islands, was, AI in Cairo now knew, growing virtually by the day. Throughout January 1941 AI in Cairo built up a very accurate assessment of the

---

<sup>576</sup> *ibid*, p. 306

<sup>577</sup> Lewin, p. 84.

<sup>578</sup> Hinsley, p. 385.

<sup>579</sup> Schofield, p. 169.

strength of the German air deployment to the area. 'At the end of January, when the true figures were 120 long-range bombers, 150 dive-bombers and 40 fighters [AI] put the numbers at 160, 150 and 40 respectively'.<sup>580</sup> So good, in fact, was the information that AI was receiving that this over estimation of the amount of long-range bombers actually deployed was rectified correctly by 4 February.

## **FEBRUARY BRINGS THE WEHRMACHT**

While the deployment of German air assets to Libya had been accurately confirmed by British AI in early January they were not, as yet, convinced that army deployments were about to be made. However, in early February, although evidence had been mounting for some time that the Germans were coming, AI finally began to take the reports of German Army deployments to Libya seriously. It has to be said however that even then they only belatedly came to this conclusion when the weight of evidence suggesting that this was about to happen became so overwhelming that they could no longer ignore it. Information from diplomatic sources, Italian POWs and Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) agents had all indicated for sometime that large scale German troop movements were being made to Italian ports. While further reports from similar sources confirmed that practise troop embarkations were taking place in Sicily.<sup>581</sup>

Now, at least, alert to the possibility that the Germans were preparing to move into Libya it was not long before AI had more definite information on German intentions. An SIS 'source reported that huge quantities of colonial equipment and stores for war in African conditions were being transported southwards'.<sup>582</sup> Intelligence reports were also received from Poles who were monitoring railway movements in Italy, their observations identified large convoys of trains bringing more German troops to Italian ports. Furthermore, 'air reconnaissance disclosed that by 3 February close on half a

---

<sup>580</sup> Hinsley, p. 385.

<sup>581</sup> *ibid*, p. 386.

<sup>582</sup> *ibid*

million tons of shipping, consisting of ships of 6,000 tons or over, had been concentrated in Naples'.<sup>583</sup> On 9 February a German signal was deciphered by AI, which indicated that this shipping might soon be on its way to Libya. The signal 'ordered special air cover for a Naples/Tripoli convoy, and [there were] indications of increased transport flights a few days later from Italy to Libya'.<sup>584</sup>

## **POST LATE FEBRUARY**

Rumours of German troops landing in Tripoli on 14 February (this was, in fact, the convoy and air movement identified by AI on 9 February) reached British HQ in Cairo almost as soon as they happened. Field Marshal Lord Carver, who, as mentioned, was at the time a junior staff officer in Cairo, and was intimately involved in the fighting in North Africa, claims in his book *Dilemmas of the Desert* 'that intelligence told Wavell a fortnight after Beda Fomm that German troops had reached Tripoli'.<sup>585</sup> The arrival of German ground troops was definitely confirmed as fact, on 20 February, when British armoured cars belonging to the KDG's, clashed with German armoured cars belonging to 3<sup>rd</sup> Reconnaissance Battalion on the Via Balbia near El Agheila. 'On the British side there was a long moment of question and incredulity ('My God Weren't those Germans?') and after the briefest exchange of shots the armoured cars of the KDG's, mindful of their chief duty to get back with information, circled around to the south and hastened back to report'.<sup>586</sup>

This incident marked the commencement of a series of clashes between British and German forces around El Agheila. These confrontations were, perhaps surprisingly, instigated deliberately by the Germans with the precise intention of telling the British that German forces had arrived in Libya. The Germans hoped that by advertising their

---

<sup>583</sup> *ibid*

<sup>584</sup> Lewin, p. 118.

<sup>585</sup> Carver, p. 19.

<sup>586</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 245.

presence this would discourage the British from pressing on to Tripoli. 'Rommel decided that he must impose caution on the British by showing a German presence in the forward area'.<sup>587</sup> As it happened the Germans need not have worried about a British advance as no one in HQ Cairo had any intention of moving on Tripoli or anywhere else in the Western Desert for that matter.

The clash did however cause Wavell to at least consider moving troops from East Africa back to the Western Desert. 'The quandary, as Wavell phrased it, was to decide whether to make another effort to capture the Keren position and reach Asmara or to adopt a defensive attitude in Eritrea and begin withdrawing troops'.<sup>588</sup> Wavell, it seems considered that capturing Keren was the more pressing objective, and, despite the obvious threat building up against his desert flank, ordered Platt to take Keren thus denying Neame the troops he so desperately need in the Western Desert.

However, the Germans were not to know any of this and consequently continued to advertise their presence in Libya. They gave the British further evidence of their arrival on 21 February. The pilot of a British reconnaissance aircraft flying west of El Agheila sighted an eight-wheeled armoured car which could only be German as they were the only army operating such vehicles at this time.<sup>589</sup> This sighting was soon followed by more positive confirmation. On 24 February doubts were 'finally dispelled in London and Cairo, after a clash of armoured cars at Agheila and history, selecting the appropriate man, chose Lieutenant E. T. Williams – later to be distinguished as Montgomery's chief intelligence officer – to identify a German presence at the front'.<sup>590</sup>

In an effort to establish the extent of the German advance in Libya British air reconnaissance was stepped up. Air reconnaissance, which had already detected the presence of motor convoys leaving Tripoli heading east, soon reported a large

---

<sup>587</sup> Jackson, p. 92.

<sup>588</sup> Raugh, p. 180.

<sup>589</sup> Jackson, p. 93.

<sup>590</sup> Lewin, p. 118.

concentration of vehicles which had previously been about 150 miles east of Tripoli, were now approaching El Agheila.<sup>591</sup> By late February HQ Cairo and Wavell not only knew that German air and ground forces had arrived in Tripoli they also knew, beyond per-adventure, that there were a lot of them and that they were on the move east.

Churchill, reading the intelligence he had received in London, also detected the movement east and was concerned. On 27 February he cabled Wavell thus: 'in view of arrival of German armoured formations and aircraft in Tripolitania the question of defence commitments in Egypt and Cyrenaica has been considered here. Would be grateful if you would telegraph a short appreciation'.<sup>592</sup> While Churchill waited for his appreciation from Cairo his code breakers were making significant progress on gaining even more information on German intentions. 'On 28 February Bletchley broke the latest version of the Mediterranean Luftwaffe cipher (known as Light Blue) and continued to read it currently'.<sup>593</sup>

The new intelligence gained from Light Blue only served to confirm what was already known in Cairo; the Germans were in Libya and heading in force towards what would be Neame's command area. With intelligence of this quality and quantity it is not creditable that on the eve of Neame's appointment, 28 February, Wavell could have been in any doubt that the British positions in Cyrenaica were imminently going to be attacked. Neame consequently needed to be ordered to put in place preparations to adequately defend his command as urgently as possible.

Wavell gave no such order instead his G.H.Q. advised Neame, as he was about to leave Cairo, 'that Cyrenaica was now a passive battle-zone, with no possible enemy threats'.<sup>594</sup> G.H.Q.'s reassuring words, however, failed to give Neame much comfort on his arrival in Cyrenaica when he looked at the daily intelligence reports which told him

---

<sup>591</sup> Woolcombe, p. 81.

<sup>592</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War Vol III*, p. 174.

<sup>593</sup> Lewin, p. 122.

<sup>594</sup> Neame, p. 267.

of more German landings in Tripoli and he looked at the pitiful state the forces Wavell had allocated to him were in. In *Playing with Strife* Neame laments that: 'I requested reinforcements, and also naval and air action against the enemy convoys streaming over to Tripoli. But no effective action was possible: everything was going to Greece'.<sup>595</sup>

## CHAPTER 3

Clausewitz wrote: *The defender waits for the attack in position, having chosen a suitable area and prepared it; which means he has carefully reconnoitred it, erected solid defences at some of the most important points, established and opened communications, sited his batteries, fortified some villages, selected covered assembly areas, and so forth. The strength of his front, access to which is barred by one or more parallel trenches or other obstacles or by dominant strong points, makes it possible for him, while the forces at the points of actual contact are destroying each other, to inflict heavy losses on the enemy at low cost to himself*.<sup>596</sup>

This chapter will examine the main fighting elements of Neame's command. A detailed review will be made of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division and its sub units. Reviews will be made of all the armoured units in the division 3<sup>rd</sup> Hussars, 5<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment and 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment. The artillery and infantry components of the division will also be scrutinised in this section. Having established the capability of Neame's division a review of the available intelligence will be made. The chapter will then move on to chronicle Wavell's visit to Neame's command area and the advice he gave his subordinate. The chapter will then move on to chart the final dispositions of Neame's forces. Reviews will be made of the terrain the importance of holding Brega and where each British unit was deployed prior to the German attack. The chapter will conclude with a review of the Germans preparation for their attack and the actual battle for Brega.

### NEAME AND HIS ARMOURED DIVISION

Neame, it has to be said, was, on the face of it at least, a curious choice of commander for the huge Cyrenaica Command. The Command, according to Wavell, was not intended to be a fighting command more an administrative occupation with the garrison of two mechanised divisions having a static defensive role.<sup>597</sup> However, Neame had little administrative knowledge and had never commanded any unit bigger than a

---

<sup>595</sup> *ibid*

<sup>596</sup> Clausewitz, p. 390.

<sup>597</sup> Jackson, p. 94.



division. Moreover, he had no experience whatsoever of commanding armoured forces and had no experience of mechanised warfare.<sup>598</sup>

As Wavell was to write later of this appointment; I did not know him well; he had had 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and had gone to Palestine to replace George Giffard. He was a sapper, and had been an instructor at the staff collage, and was the author of a book on strategy, so I accepted him as a skilful and educated soldier; his V. C. was a guarantee of his fighting qualities. He was at this time a great friend of Dick O'Connor's for whose judgment I had much respect.<sup>599</sup>

It is perhaps significant to note here that although Wavell was Supreme Commander and could therefore make his choice of subordinate commanders based on his own judgment he subtly, when Neame is exposed later as not being up to the job, for reasons which we shall see were not completely his own fault, blames O'Connor for his choosing Neame.

Neame, in fact, paradoxically, was in many respects admirably suited to the task of defending Cyrenaica. As Wavell points out he was a sapper, an engineer, he had won a V. C. in the trenches in France and like many officers of his generation knew exactly how to construct and hold a defensive position.<sup>600</sup> He understood the strategic importance of holding Cyrenaica and knew how to deploy a division to gain maximum advantage. Indeed Neame possessed all the military qualities required to hold Brega, and by extension Cyrenaica. However, as we shall see, what Neame lacked was the clear instruction from his commanding officer, Wavell, to establish a creditable forward defence line.

Neame took up his new command on 28 February just as big changes were about to be made in Cyrenaica. The decision to go to Greece had caused a complete turn around in the quality of the forces allocated to defend Cyrenaica; well equipped and experienced units were leaving and poorly equipped and in some cases less experienced

---

<sup>598</sup> Deighton, p. 297.

<sup>599</sup> Connell, p. 383.

<sup>600</sup> Smithers, p. 7. Although Neame had never commanded a mechanised unit in action he had been from 1921-23, a Staff Collage instructor and was a strong advocate of the tank and mechanised warfare.

units were arriving. This quickly caused Neame to complain that with the resources he had at his disposal he would be hard pressed to defend his new command should it be attacked.<sup>601</sup> As Jackson writes; ‘Neame had a right to complain about the state of the Cyrenaica Garrison. In the first place it was established as a Garrison, and not as a fighting force. His headquarters was not mobile; he had too few radio sets, and was dependent on local telephone service boosted by his own signallers’.<sup>602</sup> Furthermore, ‘at the end of February 1941, with all quiet on the Western Desert front, 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division was withdrawn from El Agheila and replaced by 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division’.<sup>603</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division was, in theory at least, the most important unit under Neame’s direct command but was not, as later events would show, in any way capable of delivering the fighting capability expected of it.

A fully equipped and trained British armoured division was, even in early 1941, a potent fighting formation. Theoretically an armoured division would be composed of three major fighting components. The cutting edge of the division would be its 312 tanks split between two armoured brigades, 156 tanks in each brigade. Tank brigades would usually be composed of three tank regiments each equipped with 52 cruiser and or light tanks.<sup>604</sup> Where possible an armoured car regiment, motorised infantry battalion and artillery regiment would also support each armoured brigade.

The third major fighting element of the division was its support brigade or Support Group. This part of the division would usually be composed of two battalions of motorised infantry supported by a variety of artillery units, however, it must be stressed that in the desert units were frequently modified to suit circumstances, and perhaps more crucially, by the availability of units. That being said by 1940 the aspiration for

---

<sup>601</sup> Neame, p.273.

<sup>602</sup> Jackson, .p 95.

<sup>603</sup> Fletcher, p. 77.

<sup>604</sup> It should be noted here that this figure of 52 tanks was not always adhered to. The amount of tanks in a British armoured regiment varied wildly throughout the war, however, 52 seems to be the norm for the early war period and will therefore be used as a baseline figure in this work.

Support Groups was that they should have two fully motorised infantry battalions a Royal Horse Artillery regiment (16 guns) a full anti-tank regiment (36 guns) and a full light anti-aircraft regiment (36 guns).<sup>605</sup>

An armoured divisional commander would also normally have under his direct control a supply echelon, maintenance units and medical facilities two field squadrons of Royal Engineers and one field park squadron.<sup>606</sup> To communicate with its three brigades divisional HQ would have a large signals unit with radio links to both its fighting units and a rear link to Corps or even Army HQ. In ancillary fighting units the divisional commander would often have under his command a medium, and sometimes even a heavy, artillery regiment. For added firepower a motorised machine gun battalion often supported divisions.

Thus a model “Armoured Division” fighting in the Western Desert in 1941 would be composed of three brigades composed of around 20 major fighting units. Two armoured car regiments, six tank regiments, four infantry battalions, one machine gun battalion, three field artillery regiments, one, possibly two, medium artillery regiments, one anti-tank gun regiment, and at least one anti-aircraft gun regiment. However, 2AD bore little resemblance to the ideal model set out above. As the official historian comments; ‘this so-called division amounted to barely one weak armoured brigade, not fully mobile, and likely to waste away altogether if it did much fighting’.<sup>607</sup>

## **2<sup>nd</sup> ARMOURED DIVISION**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division was not, as Michael Carver observes; ‘an impressive collection. As 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division arrived in the desert to relieve the 7<sup>th</sup> in January, its commander, J. C. Tilly, had died and been replaced by another Royal Tank Corps officer, Major-General M. D. Gambier-Parry, who had been head of the military

---

<sup>605</sup> Crow, p. 30.

<sup>606</sup> *ibid*

<sup>607</sup> Connell, p. 383.

mission to Greece and had no recent experience of command'.<sup>608</sup> Moreover, not only had Gambier-Parry no recent experience of command he also, like Neame, had no experience of desert warfare. So we may see that both Neame and Gambier-Parry were not, perhaps, the most suitable officers for the posts they now held. As Lewin says: 'No professional German commander-in-chief would have tolerated [as Wavell did] such a dearth of experience among his senior subordinates'.<sup>609</sup>

In view of Gambier-Parry's lack of experience in armoured warfare his appointment on, 17 February, to such a potentially important command seems on the face of it to be a strange assignment. Moreover, this appointment becomes even stranger when one realises that at this time there were several outstanding officers with experience of commanding armoured divisions in combat standing idle in Egypt. The former commander of 7AD Michael O'Moore Creagh, for example, was now unemployed. Also available was Brigadier J. R. L. (Blood) Caunter who had stood in for Creagh when he became ill during Operation *Compass*. George Forty describes Caunter as; 'a splendid CO of great energy and imagination, constantly encouraging his young officers to get out into the desert, so as to learn the hard way to live and navigate in some of the most inhospitable conditions on the planet'.<sup>610</sup> Aside from these two experienced officers already in theatre there was also Hobo languishing in retirement in the UK who could very quickly have been flown back to Egypt.

However, when one looks a little more closely at the origins of this appointment it is not difficult to see why Wavell should have made Gambier-Parry commander of this crucially important division. Connell describes Gambier-Parry as a 'cheerful and energetic tank officer whom Wavell had known from the days of the first Armoured

---

<sup>608</sup> Carver, p. 19.

<sup>609</sup> Lewin, p 120.

<sup>610</sup> Ray Leakey, *A Tank Commander, with Nine Lives* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999) p. 8.

Force on Salisbury Plain'.<sup>611</sup> Gambier-Parry had all the qualities, at least outwardly, that Wavell desired in a subordinate officer. He was as Connell says energetic and cheerful (similar to Chink in these respects) and like Chink Wavell knew him well, this made him exactly the kind of Officer Wavell liked to have around him. Gambier-Parry was, in fact, a tank officer who looked the part and would carry out Wavell's orders without asking awkward questions. Unfortunately, however, although Gambier-Parry looked the part, the reality was that he had no combat experience, had never commanded an armoured division and, as events would soon prove, was in no way qualified to take on the job of making the dispersed elements of 2AD into an effective fighting unit. With Gambier-Parry's depth of experience kept in mind we shall now review the progress that the two brigades, 2SG and 3AB, made under his command in the period between his appointment on 17 February and the German attack on 31 March.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> ARMoured BRIGADE**

So what exactly was the state of Gambier-Parry's only armoured brigade, 3AB. To command this vitally important brigade again a rather questionable choice of commander was made especially when one reviews the pool of talent readily available. There were in Egypt at this time, arguably, three of the most talented brigadiers in the British army; these were Brigadiers H. E. Russell, (former commander of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade) W. H. E. (Strafer) Gott, (former commander of 1KRRC promoted brigadier in early 1940) and John Coomb (former commander 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars and also promoted brigadier after *Compass*) all of whom had fought with distinction throughout Operation *Compass*.<sup>612</sup>

---

<sup>611</sup> Connell, p. 383.

<sup>612</sup> For full list of senior officers of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division see Verney, pp. 291/294.

Nonetheless, despite the availability of officers with proven track records the brigade was left under the command of the fifty year old Brigadier Reginald Gordon Ward Rimington.<sup>613</sup> In 1940 Rimington had been commander of 2 RTR before being relieved of this command and made an instructor at the Armoured Fighting Vehicles Gunnery School. Rimington, like Gambier-Parry, had little in the way of battle experience and had never commanded a brigade in action having only recently been promoted to the rank of brigadier. He was, however, the son of one of Wavell's close friends. Michael Frederick Rimington,<sup>614</sup> Gordon Rimington's father; was, during the Boer War, the commander of an irregular unit known as Rimington's column.<sup>615</sup> In 1901 Wavell was sent as a draftee replacement officer to Standerton in the south-eastern Transvaal where this unit was operating. In February 1902, Rimington's column was engaged in operations against the Boers and four companies of Wavell's Regiment, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Black Watch, were attached to Rimington's unit.<sup>616</sup> Consequently during the course of these operations Rimington senior and Wavell became friends. Michael Frederick Rimington<sup>617</sup> was by any standards an outstanding soldier he fought with distinction in both the Zulu and Boer Wars and eventually became a Major General gained a KCB and a CVO. However, Rimington junior was not, as events would soon demonstrate, of the same ability as his father.

Although Rimington was nominally the Brigadier of 3AB initially he had only one unit under his command, 1 KDG. The rest of his Brigade was cobbled together between late February and early March from four formally unconnected units. Rimington's new Brigade would eventually consist of three tank regiments. The 3 Hussars (3H) and 6

---

<sup>613</sup> Rimington was born in 1891 and died of wounds in 1941

[http://www.generals.dk/.../Rimington/Reginald Gordon Ward/Great Britain.html](http://www.generals.dk/.../Rimington/Reginald%20Gordon%20Ward/Great%20Britain.html)

<sup>614</sup> Sir Michael Frederick Rimington KCB CVO born 23 May 1858 in Penrith Cumbria died 19 December 1928.

<sup>615</sup> Connell, p. 42.

<sup>616</sup> *ibid*

<sup>617</sup> Sir Michael Frederick Rimington KCB CVO born 23 May 1858 in Penrith Cumbria died 19 December 1928.

Royal Tank Regiment (6 RTR) were allocated to 3AB in late February. The 5<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment (5 RTR) was added to the Brigade in early March. The artillery element of the Brigade, also added in early March, was provided by the addition of 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (1 RHA).

This unit was, it is true, a scratch formation, but, as we shall see, the units which made up the Brigade were by no means inexperienced. The personnel in these units were some of the most battle hardened and experienced troops in the Middle East. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the fighting potential of these units was, if they were marshalled correctly, as good, if not better, than any four fighting units in the British order of battle. However, the crucial words here are “marshalled correctly” for if 3AB were to play any significant part in the fighting to come, whenever that might be, then these units needed to be assembled, re-equipped and re-organised as soon as possible.

### **3 HUSSARS**

The normal war establishment of armoured regiments such as 3H ‘specified three tanks to the troop. The troop was a subalterns command. He rode in one of the tanks. The Squadron was a major’s command and comprised five troops and a Squadron HQ. The latter comprised four tanks. Three Squadrons made up a unit’.<sup>618</sup> Thus on this ratio a tank regiment such as 3H would have a war establishment of 57 tanks. However, it seems that few regiments at this stage of the war had a full war establishment. The more normal establishment appears to have been three Squadrons, each with 15 tanks; these would be split into four troops, not the authorised five. Each troop would have three tanks, and the HQ troop would also have 3 tanks. The Regimental HQ Squadron would typically have 7 tanks giving a normal operating establishment of 52 tanks. The 52-tank

---

<sup>618</sup> Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army 1940-1944* (London: Frank Cass Publishing, 2000) p. 81.

establishment was, in fact, how 3H and most other tank regiments took to the field in 1940/41.

## **A PASSAGE TO EGYPT**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Hussars were not pre-war part of the desert army but were added later as a reinforcing unit. With Italy's entry into the war, in June 1940, the threat to Egypt obviously began to grow. Therefore, when Wavell returned to the UK in August and explained to the War Cabinet how deficient in armoured units he was, certain additional forces were made available to him. Consequently, on 10 August 1940, with the agreement of General Dill, and with Eden's assent, a plan was placed before Churchill which included the sending of three extra armoured units to the Middle East.<sup>619</sup> These additional armoured units were 2 RTR with cruisers, 7 RTR with Matilda tanks, and 3H with their Vickers light tanks.<sup>620</sup>

Consequently in mid August 1940, 3 H received two pieces of news. Firstly they were to get a new commander, Lieut-Colonel W. G. Petherick became their new CO. Secondly they were being sent to the Middle East. They 'sailed from the Mersey on August 22, 1940. Five weeks later, by way of the Cape, the convoy safely reached Port Said'.<sup>621</sup> Once in Egypt the Hussars began a rigorous regime of training and acclimatisation to desert conditions. This programme was so successful that within two weeks of their arrival in Cairo 3H were ready to move into the desert.<sup>622</sup>

However, before 3H commenced active operations an important adjustment to their establishment had to be made. Experiences in France had shown that light tanks operating alone were vulnerable especially in tank versus tank fighting. Indeed against the well organised German armoured units the light British tanks had proved to be

---

<sup>619</sup> Lewin, p. 41.

<sup>620</sup> Neillands, p. 48.

<sup>621</sup> Bolitho, p. 250.

<sup>622</sup> *ibid*



virtually useless.<sup>623</sup> Therefore, in an effort to give 3H 'additional strength, and to save time training a squadron in heavier tanks, 'B' Squadron was exchanged with its opposite number in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Tanks, who were equipped with cruisers'.<sup>624</sup> Now equipped with Regimental HQ, 7 light tanks, and two light Squadrons 'A' and 'C' each with 15 light tanks, and one heavy Squadron 'B' composed of 15 cruiser tanks, the 52 tanks of 3H began active operations against the Italians.

To gain operational experience 3H were sent forward to the Mersa Matruh area where they operated against Italian columns. 'They drew first blood, and suffered their first casualties – one officer and one man killed – in two actions in November'.<sup>625</sup> When the British offensive against the Italians, Operation *Compass*, began on 9 December 3H were with the forward troops.

## **CHRISTMAS 1940**

After participating prominently in many of the early clashes with the Italians 3H gratefully accepted the rest that the lull in the fighting, caused by the replacement of divisions, had given them. Christmas found the men of 3H occupying dugouts and tents on one side of the El Adem road near Sidi Azeiz aerodrome opposite Tobruk. Roy Farran, a 3H lieutenant, reports that their 'Christmas dinner was bully beef and salty water, but the Colonel authorised a special issue of rum'.<sup>626</sup> This rather meagre ration was all the harder to take when they heard on the BBC evening news that all the troops in the Western Desert were having Turkey for their Christmas dinner.<sup>627</sup> Consequently in an effort to improve their rations, Farran, as he was temporally without a tank, was ordered by his commanding officer to see if he could scrounge some better food for the troops. He makes the following observations on his efforts: 'my first visit was to the

---

<sup>623</sup> Peter Gudgin, *Armoured Fire Power* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997) p. 41.

<sup>624</sup> Bolitho, p. 250.

<sup>625</sup> *ibid*

<sup>626</sup> Farran, p. 54.

<sup>627</sup> *ibid*

Service Corps dump at Sollum, where I successfully looted two crates of oranges. I was astonished to see the large quantities of various rations in the dump, which somehow never seemed to get to the forward troops'.<sup>628</sup>

Little did Farran know that the primary reason why rations and other stores were not getting to the forward troops was because of his Commander-in-Chief's exchange of units' order. This order had stripped the desert bare of trucks. There was, in reality, plenty of food and other supplies strewn across the desert but nothing to transport them to the front. As Farran further confirms when on his next foray he visited the fort at Sidi Omar where again he found, as he puts it, "valuable treasure".<sup>629</sup> Nonetheless, despite their lack of rations, the Hussars continued with the advance right up to the battle of Beda Fomm. Once the battle was over 7AD and 3H were initially kept busy in the Beda Fomm area salvaging equipment and burying the dead. To assist in this endeavour two Light Recovery Sections were moved up and the Divisional Workshops were opened five miles south of Benghazi.<sup>630</sup>

Towards the end of February, when 7AD began returning to Egypt, 3H were not included in the move. They were to be left behind with all their light tanks.<sup>631</sup> In an effort to make themselves more comfortable they established a makeshift camp in the hills near Agedabia just off the coastal road. Benghazi was north of their base about one hundred miles to their rear. The battlefield of Beda Fomm also lay to their north about forty miles from their base. The village of Mersa el Brega was situated about thirty miles to their south. On 9 February the war diary of 3H informs us that they had recovered from Beda Fomm 'war materials consisting of vehicles, cars, diesel water wagons, petrol carriers and supplies of wine and food'.<sup>632</sup>

---

<sup>628</sup> *ibid*

<sup>629</sup> *ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>630</sup> Verney, p. 48.

<sup>631</sup> *ibid*

<sup>632</sup> War Diary 3 Hussars WO 169/1385

There now, theoretically, and in some cases in reality, commenced a period of peace and plenty, at least in regard to food, wine, clothing and vehicles. The contents of the ten-mile long Italian column and their own supply echelon had now provided an abundance of the necessities of life. The RAOC 'established a series of Field Supply Depots at Mechili and Msus on the inland route and Tecnis (north-east of Benghazi) and El Magrum (south of Benghazi) on the coast road'.<sup>633</sup> As for taking plunder from the Italian column this also continued. The 3H war diary, on 16 February, jubilantly declares that 'numerous small lorries, Harrods delivery vans so-called, small Italian Fiat Togs, diesel lorries, for petrol loads etc, were all collected and transport made more or less up to strength, with Italian vehicles'.<sup>634</sup> Moreover, a bus borrowed from the Italian column was run daily into Benghazi, which enabled the Regiment for the first time in three months, to eat fresh meat and vegetables on a regular basis.

However, it seems that not everybody in 3H benefited from the fruits of victory. Nor, it seems, was the lull in the fighting used by Colonel Petherick to bring 3H back to the peak of fighting efficiency. Instead of using the break in the fighting, however long it might last; to bring the tanks of his regiment back to full fighting ability, Colonel Petherick allowed resources to be wasted and men to leave the Regimental area. Lieutenant Heseltine, for example, acquired one of the Italian cars abandoned at Beda Fomm and drove it with some fellow officers all the way back to Cairo. Heseltine recalls that as they 'drove into Cairo he remembered that they had just clocked up the thousand miles as they crossed the Kasr-el-Nil Bridge'.<sup>635</sup> This was 1,000 unnecessary miles. The journey to and from the battlefield and his time in Cairo kept this valuable officer away from his unit for over two weeks.

---

<sup>633</sup> Fernyhough, p. 143.

<sup>634</sup> 3 Hussars 169/1385

<sup>635</sup> Richard Heseltine, *Pippin's Progress* (Suffolk: Silver Horse Press, 2001) p. 54.

Nor it seems were Colonel Petherick and Lieutenant Heseltine the only officers who seemed to be not taking the war very seriously. On his way back to his unit Heseltine stayed the night in Barce at the Hotel Moderna. Also staying at the hotel was none other than the commander of all British forces in Cyrenaica General 'Jumbo' Wilson.

Heseltine recalls that General Wilson enjoyed his stay enormously. 'In the evening the Italian staff put on a cabaret for him. One act, rather doubtful and suggestive, was a *pas de deux* danced by a great big fat chef and a tiny waiter. Before it was finished, up jumps Jumbo and, grabbing the waiter, danced around in a similar fashion to great applause from all of us'.<sup>636</sup>

It seems that while some soldiers were able to take advantage of the spoils of war others were not so lucky. Despite the glut of supplies found in the abandoned Italian column at Beda Fomm and the stores brought forward by the British transport columns and the luxury to be found in nearby captured towns such as Barce and Benghazi men still went short of vital necessities. Heseltine back from his leave in Cairo describes the state of his men at this time thus; 'this was the time when we thought of ourselves as the forgotten army. Rations were monotonous and meagre. The issue of one orange per man after about two months was an event. Nothing fresh seemed to reach the forward troops and the lack of vegetables and fruit gradually told on us in the form of jaundice'.<sup>637</sup>

Perhaps, had officers such as Lieutenant Heseltine not been allowed to go on leave and had instead used some of the captured transport they had acquired to bring fresh foodstuffs to their men then the jaundice they contracted might not have occurred. Had Colonel Petherick not granted unrestricted leave to his officers then they might have been able to rectify some of the many deficiencies in their battered tanks and equipment. Moreover, had General Wilson, perhaps, spent more time reorganising his

---

<sup>636</sup> *ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>637</sup> *ibid*, p. 58.

dispersed formations, and less time dancing with waiters in luxury hotels, then, when the Germans did attack, units like 3AB might have been in a fit state to resist them.

## **WHERE HAVE ALL THE TANKS GONE**

While the patchy state of supply, in regard to sustenance seems to have varied throughout the unit, the supply of light tanks, suddenly, on 21 February, became plentiful. The war diary of 3H records that; ‘Regiment have light tanks showered on them by 7H and 6 RTR<sup>638</sup> total at end of take over 63. Technical Adjutant spent 4 days going round choosing best only 46 were passed as possibles instead of 54 of establishment’.<sup>639</sup> Along with the tanks, and probably more valuable to the Technical Adjutant, (TA) 3H where also gifted all the spares that the other regiments held as well. With these spares the TA gave it that in his opinion it would take two weeks to get the 46 possibles up to scratch.

Therefore, if we take the TAs assessment as accurate then it does not seem unreasonable to speculate that with the light and cruiser tanks that 3H already held they would be brought up to full establishment, 52 battle worthy tanks, by early March. This, unfortunately, did not happen. On 14 March, for example, several weeks after the TA said he could get 46 tanks operational, the Regiment had only 32 tanks available, 4 in HQ, 11 in ‘C’ Squadron, 10 in ‘B’ Squadron and 8 in ‘A’ Squadron and 1 not issued. On 20 March, the situation was even worse with the war diary telling us that 3H had only 30 tanks available. This low tally of available tanks did not improve as March progressed. On the eve of battle, 31 March, Woollcombe has it that 3H had 29 light tanks but fails to mention any cruiser tanks and gives no indication of how many of the

---

<sup>638</sup> The war diary suggests that some of the light tanks given to 3H were from 6 RTR this is however not very likely as 6 RTR had left the battlefield much earlier and handed its tanks and trucks to 2 RTR. It is possible therefore that some of the tanks handed to 3H originated with 6RTR but were at the time of the handover 2 RTR tanks.

<sup>639</sup> War Diary 11H WO 169/1385

lights were serviceable.<sup>640</sup> Raugh informs us that 3H had 35 light tanks but again like Woollcombe fails to mention how many were serviceable or if any cruisers were available.<sup>641</sup>

It is therefore virtually impossible to give a definitive tally of how many operational tanks 3H had at the time of the German attack but it seems to have been around 30 lights and perhaps 10 less than perfect Italian cruisers. So, the question might fairly be asked, why, when the need for armoured units was so acute, and the means to re-equip this unit were at hand, was 3H not brought back up to strength in time to meet the German attack?

The cause of the pitiful state of 3H when the Germans attacked seems to have stemmed from three separate self inflicted wounds. Two of these wounds we shall review in detail here; these are the organisational structure of the Regiment and its operational use. The third wound, that is the decision to try and equip part of the Regiment with Italian cruiser tanks, we shall review later.

The first problem in getting this unit battle worthy was organisational. When operations came to an end in mid February it was decided that the establishment of 3H should remain as it had been throughout *Compass*. HQ squadron would have 7 light tanks; two squadrons would also have light tanks, 15 in each squadron, and one squadron of 15 cruiser tanks, 52 tanks in total. However, this decision instantly caused 3H a problem. It will be remembered that it had been decided to return all the British cruisers of 7AD back to the Delta for maintenance. As the existing cruiser squadron serving with 3H had been originally borrowed from 2 RTR, and 2 RTR were now returning with the rest of 7AD to the Delta, this would mean that 3H would lose its 15 strong cruiser squadron.<sup>642</sup>

---

<sup>640</sup> Woollcombe, p. 84.

<sup>641</sup> Raugh, p. 185.

<sup>642</sup> War Diary 2 RTR WO 169/1410

On 11 February orders were received by 2 RTR informing them that the light tanks they had received from 3H were to be returned to them and that they were to receive back from 3H their 'B' Squadron personnel and their cruisers. When this exchange was completed 2 RTR were told, on 16 February, that they should now hand their five remaining fully fit cruisers with all the remaining ammunition back to 3H and hand in their fifteen cruisers which needed overhaul to the Divisional Workshops near Benghazi. Once this hand over was complete 2 RTR, minus its tanks, was to make its way to Tobruk for embarkation back to the Delta.<sup>643</sup>

However, on 19 February these orders were suddenly changed and the five fit tanks going to 3H were also dispatched to Divisional Workshops. On 20 March all the remaining ammunition with the Regiment was ordered to be handed into the Advanced Ordnance Depot at Benghazi. On 21 February all captured lorries and guns were disposed of at the dump for captured war materials near Beda Fomm. On 22 February 2 RTR moved off for Tobruk which they reached on 24 February.<sup>644</sup> The 2 RTR tanks, which had been left at Div Workshops along with several tanks from 1 RTR and some Bren Gun Carriers from 2 RB and 1 KRRC, were driven by road to Tobruk where they arrived on 26/27 February.<sup>645</sup> Once the personnel of 2 RTR arrived in Tobruk the Regiment less heavy equipment, vehicles and tanks embarked for the Delta. Over the next few days most of the armoured vehicles in Tobruk were also evacuated back to the Delta. Thus there were now no cruiser tanks in the forward areas.

Why 15 of the cruisers could not have been reallocated to 3H instead of being sent back to the Delta is unclear. As mentioned by the war diarist of 2 RTR at least 5 cruisers were completely fit for service and many others we know were runners as they made the journey back to Tobruk on their own tracks. Moreover, there was little room for these

---

<sup>643</sup> *ibid*

<sup>644</sup> *ibid*

<sup>645</sup> *ibid*

returning tanks as all the workshops in the Delta were already full to bursting with hundreds of tanks needing repair. This being the case it would have seemed logical to have left the 5 fully fit cruisers and 10 of the best runners with 3H, at least until there was space in the workshops for them.

However, logic seems to have been ignored and all the British cruisers were removed. With the cruisers gone the fitters of 3H now started salvaging the best of the light tanks they had been given and servicing those they already held. The amount of work alluded to by the TA of 3H; to bring the light tanks given to the Regiment back up to fighting standard on 21 February was, it will be remembered, two weeks.<sup>646</sup> This indicates a lot of workshop time and resources. Nonetheless, this level of resource, both workshop space and spares, must have been available at the time of the assessment otherwise the TA would have given a different time scale for getting the 46 tanks he felt recoverable back into action. Although why he felt the need to get as many as 46 operational is a mystery as he must have known 3H only had crews available for 37 light tanks (as 15 crews were being assigned to the Italian cruiser tanks).

The decision to remove the British cruisers had a debilitating effect on 3H far greater than the loss of 15 tanks out of 52 might suggest. As mentioned armoured regiments composed exclusively of light tanks were practically worthless. Without tanks armed with an armour piercing gun accompanying them they were easy pray for enemy armour and artillery. This had been proved in France in 1940 and was still the case in the desert in 1941. Therefore without a cruiser squadron the fighting ability of 3H was seriously compromised.

The second reason for 3H not being fully operational was the cavalier way in which the remaining light tanks were used. The departure of the British cruisers meant that in theory the fitters of 3H now only had one type of tank to work on. Consequently it

---

<sup>646</sup> War Diary of 3 Hussars PRO WO 169/1385



might be expected that this work would progress quickly. Unfortunately this proved not to be the case. Instead of allowing the fitters to work on the light tanks, and thereby conserving engine and track life, the crews of 3H tanks were given pointless patrolling tasks. 'Although Colonel Petherick protested that his tanks were capable of only another 500 miles, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Hussars were required to waste at least sixty miles each day in getting to and from their patrol positions'.<sup>647</sup>

For some unknown reason those above Petherick, probably Rimington, ordered him to send patrols down from his base near Agedabia 30 miles to the British forward positions at Mersa el Brega.<sup>648</sup> This was a futile and wasteful use of the remaining track and engine life left in the light tanks. Moreover, while they were away from base vital maintenance, which was so sorely needed, could not be undertaken. Why this patrolling should have even been deemed necessary at all is a mystery. The armoured cars of the KDG already covered the forward areas.<sup>649</sup> Furthermore, there were plenty of other more suitable units available such as the Free French Marine Battalion and several Australian anti-tank and infantry units in the area. Any of these units could have satisfied the patrol function and some of them, as mentioned, were already doing so.

## **6 ROYAL TANK REGIMENT**

The 6 RTR was already in Egypt when war was declared and because of its training under the supervision of Hobo was exceptionally well versed in desert operations. They were originally part of 7AD and were at the start of Operation *Compass* equipped with a mix of A9/A10 cruisers and some of the ubiquitous Vickers Lights. 6 RTR were, however, not at the start of the campaign a complete regiment of HQ and three

---

<sup>647</sup> Bolitho, p. 260.

<sup>648</sup> Farran, p. 71.

<sup>649</sup> Buckingham, p. 159. Detailed account of first meeting with German troops by 1 KDG.

Squadrons. Part of their 'B' Squadron had been detached and sent to the Sudan before *Compass* started.<sup>650</sup>

The main body of 6 RTR, however, remained with 7AD and were in the starting line up for Operation *Compass*. They fought, more or less continually, throughout the early stages of the campaign. By 18 January the main body of 6 RTR, badly worn from travelling almost 500 miles from their start point in Egypt and doing some hard fighting along the way, had reached El Adem airfield outside Tobruk. They fully expected to be used in the imminent attack on Tobruk but were suddenly, and unexpectedly, taken out of the line. They were then ordered to hand over all their remaining tanks and some of their trucks to various units and return to the Delta.<sup>651</sup>

By late January they were *hors de combat* back in Cairo. They now spent the next few weeks doing guard duties and attending training courses. However, their leave in Cairo abruptly came to an end in mid February. The war diary records that on 19 February the first inkling of move into the Desert was received. By early evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> the initial alert was confirmed. Men were recalled from leave and the Regiment less most of its vehicles and equipment was ordered to Tobruk.<sup>652</sup>

The men of 6 RTR were being recalled to the desert. They went first by ship to Tobruk and then in borrowed trucks, back to where they had started, to El Adem airfield, on 23 February. At El Adem they were informed that they were to be re-equipped and made part of the newly forming 3AB. Their new tanks; they were told, would be Italian M11/13s, which 2 RTR and 3H had captured at Beda Fomm. They would, in due course, collect their new mounts from the battlefield at Beda Fomm.<sup>653</sup>

Their re-equipment with Italian tanks started on 27 February when the personnel of 'A' Squadron, the Light Aid Detachment, some selected tank drivers and the Signal

---

<sup>650</sup> Fletcher, p. 77.

<sup>651</sup> War Diary 6 RTR WO 169/1415

<sup>652</sup> *ibid*

<sup>653</sup> *ibid*

Troop; set off for Beda Fomm. They took with them rations for 7 days and petrol for 400 miles.<sup>654</sup> While 'A' Squadron made its way to Beda Fomm, the rest of the Regiment spent their time either organising transport or amusing themselves by removing M11/13s from the Tobruk defences and dismantling them. By 1 March 'B' Squadron were also ready to move up to Beda Fomm. They arrive at their new base about 6 miles from Beda Fomm on 4 March. On 12 March HQ Squadron and 'C' Squadron also arrived at the makeshift base. The Regiment was now mostly complete in squadron manpower and wheeled vehicles and had their pick of the abandoned Italian tanks.

They now spent the next six days trying to get some of the dilapidated Italian tanks into some kind of working condition. After much effort they managed to get 15 tanks serviceable, to a degree, and on 18 March attempted to take them down to 3H who, as mentioned, were leaguered some forty miles away near Agedabia. The intention was to make 'A' Squadron of 6 RTR the cruiser Squadron of 3H and 'B' Squadron of 3H the light Squadron of 6 RTR.

These moves it was hoped would give both Regiments a mix of light and cruiser tanks. The Italian tanks, however, soon began to give trouble. The war diary of 6 RTR notes that 'A' Squadron managed to travel only about 30 miles on 18 March and leaguered for the night about 8 miles south of Agedabia. 'A certain amount of trouble was experienced en route with the tanks from overheating and they were found to be very much slower than expected when on a long march. Steering on the road was also difficult'.<sup>655</sup> This was a portent of the trouble these tanks would bring both units in the weeks to come.

---

<sup>654</sup> War Diary 6 RTR WO 169/1415

<sup>655</sup> *ibid*

## 5 ROYAL TANK REGIMENT

The 5<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment (5 RTR) arrived in the Middle East, along with its sister regiment 3 RTR, at the end of December 1940 and the tanks of both units then spent several weeks in workshops being made desert worthy before being deployed. However, before deployment could commence, in mid January, unusual orders arrived at the HQs of both 5 RTR and 3 RTR, which directed them to swap some of their tanks. Before they had left the UK both units had been equipped with an assortment of A9, A10 and A13 cruiser tanks. Now, suddenly, 3 RTR was ordered to give over to 5 RTR all their A13s and receive from 5 RTR as many A9/10s as were required to make up their losses.

With the transfer of tanks complete, on 2 February, 5 RTR now equipped mostly with A13 tanks left Amiryra for Mersa Matruh by train. The train journey according to Jake Wardrop one of 5 RTRs drivers took about two days and on detraining they drove about forty miles down the Siwa track to a place some romancer had called ‘Charring Cross. At this place they stopped for two days then the big trek was on. We drove in easy stages to the El Adem aerodrome, which is just south of Tobruk’.<sup>656</sup> They arrived, according to the war diary, at their leaguer area, which was, in fact, 13 miles west of El Adem airfield, on 6 February.

The 5 RTR now settled down, quite unexpectedly, to a period of quite prolonged inaction. The purpose of their move to El Adem was to bring them into the desert with a view to them replacing or reinforcing the advance units of 7AD which were by this time very short of tanks.<sup>657</sup> However, with the elimination of the Italian Army at Beda Fomm, on 7 February, the original urgent need for their services had temporarily disappeared. It might be recalled that at the conclusion of the battle of Beda Fomm no clear decision had been made as to whether the British should press on to Tripoli.

---

<sup>656</sup> George Forty, *Tanks Across the Desert: The War Diary of Jake Wardrop* (London: William Kimber, 1981) p. 42.

<sup>657</sup> War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

Therefore, Drew's men waited at El Adem for orders uncertain of their future deployment.

On 17 February, the day Gambier-Parry took command of 2AD, the war diary records that the 'Brigadier [Rimington] returned from Corps HQ and gave verbal instructions about the formation of a Brigade Group including all Brigade services but without 5 RTR. 5 RTR to remain in El Adem area until receiving orders to move back to Egypt'.<sup>658</sup> Between their arrival at El Adem on 6 February and 17 February when it looked as though they were going to be returned to Egypt it seems that no one in authority had decided what to do with 5 RTR. However, with the confirmation that German troops had landed in Libya orders were quickly changed, for the time being 5 RTR were staying at El Adem. Wilson, in *Press on Regardless*, has this to say about events now unfolding at El Adem. 'At the end of February, (it was, in fact, 23 February, that 6 RTR arrived at El Adem) the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion without tanks' came, without explanation, under command of The Fifth, as did 1 RHA'.<sup>659</sup>

The men of 5 RTR, with the departure of 6 RTR for Beda Fomm, now settled down, some 400 miles behind Brega, to a life of relaxed inactivity at their base near El Adem. Despite the growing evidence that the Germans were almost daily unloading troops and tanks in Tripoli 'The Fifth continued at El Adem, taking advantage of the Australians' generosity – especially with beer – and in Jake's case, doing a lot of walking, trading WD-issue tea ration for eggs 'with the wogs', playing football and reading GONE WITH THE WIND. Before they left El Adem, the men were sunbathing'.<sup>660</sup>

This idyllic life continued for most of 5 RTR until mid March when at last it was decided to fully incorporate 5 RTR into 3AB and the first squadron was moved forward. The war diary tells us that 'A' Squadron, with 16 tanks, left El Adem for Agedabia on

---

<sup>658</sup> Edward Wilson, *Press on Regardless: The Story of the Fifth Royal Tank Regiment in WWII* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2003) p.36.

<sup>659</sup> *ibid*

<sup>660</sup> Wilson, p. 36.

12 March. On 16 March the Squadron had on strength, 11 A13 and 2 A10 tanks three A13s had by this time broken down on the march.<sup>661</sup> On 17 March the war diary confirms that the 13 remaining tanks of 'A' Squadron finally leaguered for the night near Agedabia the first 5 RTR tank unit to arrive in the forward area.

## **1<sup>st</sup> REGIMENT ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY**

While the tanks of 3AB were virtually useless there was certainly more fighting ability in their artillery support.<sup>662</sup> The Brigade had been allocated a very experienced artillery regiment; 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (1 RHA). On the outbreak of WWII 1 RHA was already a fully mechanised artillery regiment. They were equipped with a full compliment of vehicles and 16 x 25 pdr guns. The unit consisted of two eight gun batteries A/E (Chestnut Troop) and B/O. 1 RHA were initially assigned to the 1<sup>st</sup> Support Group of 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division. They were ultimately unable to take up this role as the armoured division was not ready for deployment therefore the Regiment, less A/E battery, joined 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division. The two elements of the Regiment then deployed, in April 1940, to the Saar Front in the French Sector. In June 1940, most of the personnel of B/O Battery, after severe fighting, were captured at St Valery. A/E Battery, although heavily engaged like B/O Battery, managed to get out at Dunkirk.

Once back in the UK the Regiment reformed in North Wales around the survivors of A/E Battery and other members of the Regiment who had managed to escape from France. 'After some strenuous reorganisation and retraining the loss of 'B'/'O' at St Valery was repaired by converting 'E' Troop to 'B'/'O' so that its trained horse artillerymen would act as a cadre for the new battery and the Chestnut Troop was

---

<sup>661</sup> War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

<sup>662</sup> When the First World War was over the 25 regular RHA batteries were reduced to 15, and after the reorganisation the order of battle was as follows: 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, batteries A/E (Chestnut Troop) and B/O; 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, H/I and L/N; 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, D, J, M, and P Batteries; 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, C and F; 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment, G and K; found in *The Royal Horse Artillery* by Shelford Bidwell, (London: Leo Cooper, 1973) p. 82.

expanded to produce a new 'E'.<sup>663</sup> By October 1940 1 RHA were back up to strength and were sent to Egypt. Once in the Middle East the Regiment came under the command of the 7th Armoured Division and took part in Operation *Compass*. At the conclusion of *Compass* the Regiment was transferred to 3AB and joined 5 RTR at El Adem in mid March 1941 moving with them up to the front at Brega in late March.

## **THE 2<sup>nd</sup> SUPPORT GROUP**

The other brigade of 2AD was its Support Group Brigade (2SG). Brigadier H. B. Latham commanded this brigade which would eventually, as we shall see later, be sent to occupy the Brega defensive positions.<sup>664</sup> The Support Group was composed of a single infantry battalion, The 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Rifle Brigade (9RB) also known as The Tower Hamlet Rifles.<sup>665</sup> They were reinforced by a company of machine gunners from The 1st Battalion the Northumberland Fusiliers (1NF). Their artillery support was provided by 104<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (104 RHA) with sixteen 25-pdr gun howitzers and 'J' Troop of 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (3 RHA) with a mix of 2-pdr and 37mm Bofors anti-tank guns, twelve guns in all. There were just two anti-aircraft guns to defend the Brigade from air attack but they did have a complete field ambulance unit. In front of 9RB were the armoured cars of 1 KDG with an accompanying troop of anti-tank guns, four 2-pdr anti-tank guns (mounted portee).

## **9<sup>th</sup> BATTALION THE RIFLE BRIGADE**

The 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Rifle Brigade is unusual in that it has an alternative name (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Tower Hamlets Rifles) this can sometimes be misleading as in some accounts it is referred to by one name and in others by its alternative name; however, in this work 9RB will be used to denote this unit from this point forward. 9RB was, as

---

<sup>663</sup> Bidwell, p. 87.

<sup>664</sup> Buckingham, p. 165.

<sup>665</sup> R. H. W. S. Hastings, *The Rifle Brigade in the Second World War* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950) p. 62.

mentioned, a territorial battalion raised in the East End of London. They were, however, by no means a poor quality unit. The young men who made up this battalion were in the main the product of the harsh east London environment. They were tough, resourceful and used to privation. Moreover, they were highly motivated, their families and loved ones were nightly being subjected to the Blitz and they yearned for revenge.

The whole battalion left London in the 28,000 ton P&O liner the *Duchess of Atholl* under the command of Lt Colonel Shipton. They landed at Port Said Egypt on 31 December 1940. The Battalion was described by one of its number as ‘a newly and well trained unit with brand new equipment’.<sup>666</sup> The Battalion spent the next 5 weeks in the Delta preparing for active duty before being deployed to the desert. When they did finally get out into the desert they were given the rather mundane task of policing an area around Cyrene in the Jebel of Cyrenaica. This work continued for about two weeks until they moved to Benghazi to carry out a similar role in that area.<sup>667</sup> Mid March found 9RB, not stood on the ramparts at Brega, as perhaps it should have been, in view of the well recognised build up of German forces, but on the streets of Benghazi. They were still trying to keep the peace between Arab and Italian civilians.

## **MACHINE GUNNERS PAR EXCELLENCE: 1<sup>st</sup> NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers (INF) was a Medium Machinegun Battalion which had been involved in all the major engagements of Operation *Compass*. They were organised on a RHQ and four company basis ‘W’, ‘X’, ‘Y’ and ‘Z’ each with twelve 0.303 Vickers medium machineguns. The Vickers medium machinegun was another remarkable British weapon. The Vickers had been developed before WWI and was adopted by the British Army in 1912 and remained in front line service until the

---

<sup>666</sup> A. G. Brook, Information found in letter in Imperial War Museum Archive pp. 4/5. Reference No 80/38/1

<sup>667</sup> Hastings, p. 62.



1960s. The early models, the types used by 1NF in 1940/41, could fire 450 rounds per minuet over 2,200 yards.<sup>668</sup>

In early February [probably 8/9] after a few days at Soluch, which is west of Benghazi, 1NFs moved to Benghazi where they took up residence in the newly built Duke of Aosta Barracks. The bulk of the Battalion was given the task of guarding Italian P.O.W.s and arranging for their movement back to camps in the Delta.

While most of the Battalion was employed in this role one company was sent to the forward areas. This was 'Y' Coy under the command of Captain R. F. B. Hensman.<sup>669</sup> Their orders were to give the Support Group of 7AD, which was at the time garrisoning positions in the forwards areas, some heavy machine gun fire support.<sup>670</sup> Hensman and his men were ordered 'to hold a defensive position on a ridge astride the Tripoli Benghazi road in the area of the village of Mersa Brega'.<sup>671</sup> The men of 'Y' Coy now settled into their various positions. They were mostly deployed on the south side of the road. The almost flat terrain was perfect machine gun country.<sup>672</sup>

The 1NFs association with the Support Group of 7AD lasted until the latter were withdrawn in mid February 1941. Thereafter the 7ADs Support Group infantry units were replaced by a succession of Australian infantry battalions from 9AID. This continued throughout February and up to late March when, as we shall see, 2ADs Support Group, consisting almost exclusively of 9RB, arrived to replace the Australians.<sup>673</sup>

---

<sup>668</sup> Chris Bishop, *The Encyclopedia of Weapons of World War II* (London: Amber Books, 2007) p. 244.

<sup>669</sup> C. N. Barclay, *The History of the Northumberland Fusiliers in the Second World War 1919-45* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1952) pp. 53/54

<sup>670</sup> *ibid*, p 53.

<sup>671</sup> *ibid*

<sup>672</sup> *ibid*

<sup>673</sup> *ibid*, pp. 53/54.

## **ANTI-TANK GUNNERS: 3<sup>rd</sup> REGIMENT, ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY**

The anti-tank gun element of Neame's forces at Brega was provided in the main by the 3 RHA. This unit was another British formation already in Egypt when war broke out. When 3 RHA took to the field in 1940 they were equipped with two models of anti-tank gun the British 2-pdr and the Swedish designed 37mm L45 Bofors. The British 2-pdr AT gun was a pre-war Vickers design and was consequently extremely well made and reliable. The 2-pdr was 'in its day as good as, if not better, than any contemporary design, but the rapid increase in tank armour thickness during the late 1930s rendered it obsolete just at a time when it was being placed into widespread service'.<sup>674</sup> Although heavier than most of its contemporaries, which made it slightly slower to deploy, it was very accurate, had a low profile and had a phenomenal rate of fire, 22 rounds per minute, all of which made it popular with its crews.

Its major fault, and one which was destined to render the gun almost obsolete by the time it was needed for mobile operations in the Western Desert, was its range. The maximum effective range was 600 yards; however, to stand much chance of delivering an effective hit 500 yards or less was desirable; at this range the gun could penetrate 53 mm of armour. This armour piercing capability was by later standards virtually useless but in 1940/41 was just acceptable and could still disable if not knock out all German tanks and armoured cars sent to Libya. The German heavy armoured cars, for example, the SdKfz 231, 232 and 234 series, only had 15 mm of armour.<sup>675</sup> The German tanks had armour as follows, the Mark I A, 13 mm, Mk II C, 30 mm, Mk III, J/G 50/60 mm and Mk IV 50/60 mm.<sup>676</sup> As can be seen therefore all tanks sent to Libya in early 1941, were, in fact, vulnerable to some extent to the armour piercing shells of the 2-pdr.

---

<sup>674</sup> Bishop, p.180.

<sup>675</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, p. 102.

<sup>676</sup> Kenneth Macksey, *The Guinness Book of Tank Facts & Feats* (London: Guinness Superlatives Ltd, 1972) pp. 221/222.

Unfortunately, the need to be less than 600 yards away from its potential target placed the gun and its crew well within the range of most of the enemy's machine guns. Therefore to give the gun and its crew any chance of survival and enable them to effectively engage their targets before they were destroyed the guns had to be well dug in. When this requirement was met then the 2-pdr AT gun could, even against the tanks being used in 1941, still be a viable weapon.

The other anti-tank gun in British service at this time was the Swedish designed 37mm L45 Bofors (QF in British service) AT gun. These guns had not originally been intended to equip British anti-tank gun units but when many 2-pdr guns were lost in France and consequently all new production was needed to reequip returning units to the UK, few were available to reequip units in Egypt. Therefore in an effort to find anything that could be used to equip units like 3 RHA the Ordnance Corps cast around for weapons which were available from sources closer to home.<sup>677</sup> As it happened the Sudanese Government had bought a number of 37mm L45 Bofors AT guns before the war and these were purchased by the Ordnance Corps in Egypt and some of them were issued to 3 RHA.

The performance of the 37 mm Bofors was not significantly less than that of the 2-pdr. The gun was also well made and much lighter than the 2-pdr, consequently it was also popular with its crews. As with the 2-pdr its effective range was only about 500 yards. This again put the gun at a distinct disadvantage as it was obviously vulnerable from the small arms fire likely to be directed at it from its adversary the tank. Therefore some method had to be found to get the gun in and out of action fast. This requirement was met by carrying the gun on the back of a vehicle portee. The gun crew would stay well out of range waiting their opportunity to rush in and get off a few rounds; the rate of fire was 10-12 RPM, before retiring again out of range. Again as with the 2-pdr,

---

<sup>677</sup> Fernyhough, p 116.

although not as effective as the later really powerful anti-tank guns eventually used by both sides in the desert, the Bofors portee was, if used in the right circumstances, a useful weapon. Moreover, in contrast to the 2-pdr the 37 mm Bofors could also fire HE and Incendiary (filled with White phosphorus) rounds.

3 RHA was in action throughout most of Operation *Compass* and all four batteries were either at Beda Fomm or near the battlefield when the Italians surrendered. 'J' Battery was with the Australians on the coast road advancing on Benghazi and the other three batteries were with various elements of 7AD. 'As 'J' Battery was about to enter Benghazi proper the armoured battle developed at Beda Fomm, so 'J' Battery raced south to join 'D' and 'M' Batteries in battle. However, it found the battle had already been well and truly won before it arrived'.<sup>678</sup>

With the conclusion of fighting and the capture of most of the Italian Army in Cyrenaica 3 RHA like so many other units headed back to the Delta. 'Ten days or so after the conclusion of the Beda Fomm battle the Regiment began its long 1000-mile march back to the Delta. For the first time in well over a year it was reunited at Beni Yusif Camp, just to the south of Cairo, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1941'.<sup>679</sup> The Regiment now commenced a period of rest and reorganisation in Cairo which would last until mid March.

## **104<sup>th</sup> REGIMENT ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY**

The 104<sup>th</sup> Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (Essex Yeomanry) (104 RHA) were mobilised on 1 September, 1939. The Regiment was composed of two Batteries each equipped with 8 x 25 pdrs pulled by a team of horses. The British '25-pdr was a remarkable weapon with a number of exceptional features. It could be emplaced in one minute, had a lightweight firing platform which allowed rapid all round traverse (a

---

<sup>678</sup> J. H. Dey, *Cairo to Berlin: The 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery 1939-1945* (Fleet: Arcturus Press, 2005) p. 8.

<sup>679</sup> *ibid*, p. 9.

valuable asset when fighting tanks) and replaceable tube liners that could be quickly changed in the field'.<sup>680</sup> In October 1940 the Regiment arrived in the Middle East, still with their horses, as part of the 1st Cavalry Division. Their brief stay in Cairo was by all accounts a happy time, George Crookenden, one of their officers, recalls that the unit 'was nicknamed "Groppi's Horse" from the time and money spent by the officers at Café Groppi in Cairo's Kasr el Nil Street'.<sup>681</sup>

In late 1940 the Regiment was converted from horse to vehicles. In January 1941, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel E. J. Todhunter, they left Cairo and moved into the Western Desert. They were at this time assigned to support 7AD who in their turn were supporting 6 AID in their attack on Bardia. The attack was successful and the men of 104 RHA took full advantage of the spoils of war. They had earlier relinquished some of their transport, 20 30 cwts and 3 3 ton lorries, to Divisional H.Q., who like most other elements of 7AD were now short of transport. The taking of Bardia radically changed the fortunes of 104 RHA especially in regard to transport. Their stay in Bardia lasted until mid January and they took full advantage of their time in the town. The war diary informs us that on 7 January after a frantic search for any captured vehicles which would go they found enough to make good all their deficiencies.<sup>682</sup>

This was a time of plenty for 104 RHA and many other units involved in this stage of the fighting. Gunner L. E. Tutt serving in 414 Battery of 104 RHA recalled that they could now enjoy a brandy after their evening meal and smoke a long black cheroot. They fitted themselves out 'with soft blankets and warm pullovers and got rid of their ammunition boots in favour of the soft, untanned leather ones favoured by their foes'.<sup>683</sup> Other useful finds included miles of telegraph wire, field telephones, wireless batteries, battery charging equipment and best of all powerful radio sets which could pick up the

---

<sup>680</sup> Curt Johnson, *Artillery: The Big Guns go to War* (London: Octopus Books, 1976) p. 81.

<sup>681</sup> Major-General George Crookenden 1920-2005, Taken from his obituary in *The Times*, 17-02-2005.

<sup>682</sup> War Diary of 104 RHA WO 169/1431

<sup>683</sup> L. E. Tutt, Taken from Imperial War Museum archive Ref 85/35/1

B.B.C. in London. They also acquired many Fiat and Lancia heavy trucks which they used to carry ammunition and tow guns if their quad gun tractors were put out of action. Tutt continues; 'because of our looted Fiats and Lancias we were able to acquire even more food and drink. The sheer bulk of materials, weapons, ammunition, vehicles and fuel was beyond belief'.<sup>684</sup>

The unit now made up to more than full establishment in vehicles, and stocked up with supplies of every kind, soon moved on to its next mission the attack on Tobruk. Tutt remarks of this new move; 'just when we reach the stage where we could not squeeze any more booty on to our vehicles we were ordered to move forward to support the infantry preparing to attack Tobruk'.<sup>685</sup>

The 104 RHA took part in the capture of Tobruk, their guns assisting the Australians to take the town on 22 January. The successful completion of this engagement rewarded the 104<sup>th</sup> with another haul of booty.<sup>686</sup> The war diary tells us that on 23 January they were again fortunate to 'find in their immediate neighbourhood a number of sound vehicles some diesel, but some petrol too. The C.O. took a heavy lorry to Tobruk and obtained certain foods stores for the men such as fresh frozen meat and tinned foods, sugar, chocolate etc.'<sup>687</sup>

With the surrender of the Italians at Beda Fomm 104 RHA settled down, like so many other units at this time, to a period of inactivity, presumably uncertain whether they were to go on to Tripoli or be sent back to the Delta. It was not to be until mid February that their uncertainty would be over when they were ordered back to the Delta. By 26 February they had reached Mersa Matruh and were no doubt thinking about the fun they would soon be having in Café Groppi when suddenly orders were received which put a break on their plans. The war diary continues; 'at Matruh received orders to

---

<sup>684</sup> *ibid*

<sup>685</sup> *ibid*

<sup>686</sup> War Diary of 104 RHA WO 169/1431

<sup>687</sup> *ibid*

return to Benghazi. We shall have to retrace our steps over more than 600 miles'.<sup>688</sup>

They were informed that they would now be the artillery component of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Divisions Support Group. Throughout late February and early March 104 RHA made their way slowly back to Benghazi to join 9RB. It should perhaps be noted here that they drove back to Benghazi, which by the time they got there entailed a voyage of over 1,200 miles, in trucks, that were according to Wavell, so worn that they could not go 400 miles to Tripoli.

### **CREDITABLE INTELLIGENCE**

In the Western Desert although the forces in the forward areas had no direct knowledge of the intelligence breakthroughs in Cairo and the UK, which as we have seen confirmed without doubt that attack was imminent, they did have tangible evidence that the Germans were on the move east. The first of the forward troops to have concerns about enemy activity on their front were the KDGs, who, as mentioned, had already clashed with German forces. The next allied unit to have concerns about enemy activity on their front were the Australians. 'The 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division had not yet been withdrawn for Greece, and the divisional commander, who was the officer responsible for the forward area, on 28 February, felt it necessary to issue a warning on the possibility of an attack'.<sup>689</sup> The Australian commanders need to be concerned was confirmed a few days later when the KDGs were again attacked.

By early March Wavell also knew that the Germans were on the move east and that there was strong evidence to suggest that they would soon embark on a full scale offensive against his troops defending Cyrenaica. On 2 March, with unequivocal evidence of growing enemy activity on his Cyrenaican front, Wavell at last found time to give his response to Churchill's concerns expressed in his 27 February cable. Wavell

---

<sup>688</sup> War Diary of 104 RHA WO 169/1431

<sup>689</sup> Woollcombe, p. 81.

confirmed his knowledge that both the Germans and the Italians were reinforcing their forces in Libya and that they were moving east. Wavell confided to Churchill thus: 'latest information indicates recent reinforcements to Tripolitania comprise two Italian infantry divisions, two Italian motorised artillery regiments, and German armoured troops estimated at maximum of one armoured brigade group'.<sup>690</sup> It must also be noted that all this reinforcement was on top of the still considerable amount of Italian troops already in Libya. These Italian troops had, since the defeat at Beda Fomm, been sent substantial amounts of new equipment and the convoys which had brought them had all been duly logged by Wavell's HQ in Cairo.

Moreover, in the same cable Wavell acknowledged what his air reconnaissance had told him earlier that there was a huge increase in the amount of enemy transport heading east on the Via Balbia.<sup>691</sup> As to when this enemy force might move onto the attack Wavell also had a remarkably accurate estimate to offer Churchill. 'He can probably maintain up to one infantry division and armoured brigade along the coast road in about three weeks, [end of March] and possibly at the same time employ a second armoured brigade, if he has one available, across the desert via Hon and Marada against our flank'.<sup>692</sup> It must be asked here in view of the recognised poor state of Neame's forces why Wavell should have thought that one infantry division and an armoured brigade group, and possibly a second armoured brigade group, turning up on Neame's desert flank was not a significant problem. He knew perfectly well that Neame's forces were short of everything and would at that time have been hard pressed to resist any sort of attack.

---

<sup>690</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War Vol III*, p. 174.

<sup>691</sup> *ibid*, p. 175.

<sup>692</sup> *ibid*, p. 174.



On 3 March Wavell received two crucially important pieces of information. The first established that the commander of the German forces in Libya was Rommel.<sup>693</sup> The second was the alarming news 'that Rommel would be ready to attack sooner than expected. The [information] came from the newly broken Light Blue Enigma key, which revealed the scale of the German build-up in Libya'.<sup>694</sup> Furthermore, the intelligence services in London were beginning to receive even more detailed information on German intentions and the scale of the reinforcements they were sending to Libya.

By early March Station X, the highly secret decoding organisation at Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, was at last reading the Axis wireless traffic almost as soon as it was received. This quickly revealed the type of unit the Germans were now assembling in Libya, 5<sup>th</sup> Light Motorised Division, and their plans to send it forward to Nofilia, a village about one hundred miles west of Brega, as soon as possible. The intended date for this unit to be at the front was 24 March.<sup>695</sup>

With this mass of information indicating in early March that there was a growing likelihood of attack in Cyrenaica by late March at the latest, Wavell's Director of Military Intelligence, Brigadier John Shearer, took it upon him self to write an appreciation of the military situation in Libya as seen from the German viewpoint. Shearer's work entitled 'an Appreciation of the Situation on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1941, by General 'X', General – Officer – Commanding German Troops Libya, was an assessment of Rommel's intentions and his chances of fulfilling them'.<sup>696</sup> Lewin

---

<sup>693</sup> Neame says he was given a dossier on Rommel on his arrival in Cairo on 28 February *Playing with Strife*, p 267.

<sup>694</sup> Bennett, p. 32.

<sup>695</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 251.

<sup>696</sup> Connell, pp. 384/385.

describes Shearer's work as 'a brilliantly perceptive appreciation'<sup>697</sup> and it is hard to argue with his opinion.

Shearer's appraisal prophetically described what the German commander's options were; 'as a striking force I have full confidence in my own Command. Subject to administrative preparations, I believe that the German Armoured Corps [note that by now Shearer is describing the German force as not just a Brigade group but as a Corps], after a few weeks' training [it is perhaps also worth remembering here that the Germans had already been in Libya for three weeks] and experience in desert warfare conditions, and unless the British substantially reinforced their present forces in Libya, could successfully undertake the reoccupation of Cyrenaica'.<sup>698</sup> Shearer presented his appraisal to Wavell on 6 March and the contents left his commander in no doubt that in his opinion the desert flank was in imminent danger.

Wavell, on the same day, compiled a report of his own entitled "Defence of Cyrenaica" which confirmed that he too now understood that the intelligence he had received and Shearer's appraisal of the situation were correct and that an attack on his desert flank would come in the near future. Wavell wrote thus of the situation now confronting him: 'In view of arrival of German forces in Tripoli as well as Italian reinforcements, it is obvious that we have thinned out the defence of Cyrenaica prematurely and too much. We shall have to reinforce it'.<sup>699</sup> However, saying that Cyrenaica should be reinforced was one thing, actually doing it was another, and, as we shall see, turned out to be way beyond Wavell's capability to successfully accomplish.

---

<sup>697</sup> Lewin, p.122.

<sup>698</sup> Connell, p. 385.

<sup>699</sup> *ibid*

## WAVELL ASSESSES THE SITUATION

*It is a doctrine of war not to assume the enemy will not come but rather to rely on one's readiness to meet him, and not to presume that he will not attack but rather to make ones self invincible.*<sup>700</sup> Sun Tzu

Wavell finally found time to go out and see Neame in mid March. On 16 March, ten days after he had written, "we shall have to reinforce it" (the Desert Flank), Wavell turned up at Neame's Barce HQ to see how acute, or otherwise, the military situation in Cyrenaica really was. The conclusions he reached, and the decisions taken at this meeting were crucial to the future defence of Cyrenaica. However, it is debatable how seriously those attending this crucial meeting took proceedings. Below are Peter Coats recollections of his time at HQ Barce.

I lunched rather drunkenly one day with Peter Laycock and Michael Gold - both fellow-members of Mr Adie's house at Eton -we ate spaghetti and drank far too much Chianti in the garden of the mess. During lunch there was an air raid, and a bomb fell on the official brothel a hundred yards away. Years after, Peter Laycock and I were reminiscing about this particular lunch, and he remembered how clumsy I was in getting into the slit-trench, probably the effect of the Chianti. He also recalled an incident of the visit which well illustrates the difference in character of my Chief and the CIGS, Dill, who was admittedly ill and depressed at that time. While inspecting Peter's unit, Dill said something about Rommel and what a formidable fellow he was, and 'With the guns you've got, you'll have a job standing up to him,' or something equally depressing to the gun crews and everyone else in earshot. Wavell, on the other hand, praised the guns (after all, they were the only ones they had) and expressed his complete confidence in the units' ability to see off any German attack. I will always remember that lunch in the Cyrenaican sunlight with my two old friends. For me it has always symbolized the end of the Wavell dream - the short halcyon few months of continual victories in the desert, a time which had effectively knocked Italy out' of the war and made my Chief a figure of world-renown.<sup>701</sup>

The importance of those involved in these meetings establishing all the facts which would then enable them to reach sensible and considered conclusions cannot be over emphasised. If a serious and realistic attempt was to be made to give Neame's command

---

<sup>700</sup> Sun Tzu, Stone, *The Art of War*, p. 118.

<sup>701</sup> Coats, p. 91.

a fighting chance of resisting attack, whenever it might come, then action, not pontification, had to be taken now.

It seems logical that when Wavell saw the state of Neame's forces he would have ordered as much help as possible to be sent forward. Wavell had already accepted that he needed to reinforce Neame and that there was an urgent need for troops and equipment and that unless Neame's deficiencies were made good he would undoubtedly lose Cyrenaica. The consequences of failing to reinforce Neame's army now had the obvious potential to be disastrous to British war aims. If Neame's forces in Cyrenaica were overrun it would leave the road to the vitally important oil and Suez Canal wide open. As Fraser says in *And We Shall Shock Them*: 'To deny North Africa to the Germans was the greatest prize. The loss of Cyrenaica (and its airfields) was to place both Egypt and Malta in peril'.<sup>702</sup> The stakes therefore could not be higher and Wavell must have known this when he visited Neame. Indeed he confirms his recognition of the risks he was taking with regard to holding Cyrenaica when on, 23 March, he telegraphs Churchill thus: 'I have to admit to having taken considerable risk in Cyrenaica after capture of Benghazi; in order to provide maximum support for Greece'.<sup>703</sup>

Wavell arrived at Neame's HQ, as mentioned, on 16 March with Dill, Eden and his ADC Coats and says that he; 'was appalled by what he found'.<sup>704</sup> In the slightly over two days he was in the area, he arrived late on the afternoon of 16 March and left on 18 March, Wavell, according to his later writings, gained information about the terrain, the state of Neame's forces, especially his armour, and the dispositions of his major units. Having evaluated Neame's situation he offered him what he considered to be sound tactical advice on how he might remedy most, if not all, of his immediate problems. Wavell's written appreciation of the military situation he found in Cyrenaica and the

---

<sup>702</sup> Fraser, p. 125.

<sup>703</sup> Lewin, p. 119.

<sup>704</sup> Pitt, *Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 248.

advice he says he gave to Neame to remedy the deficiencies he noted seems, on casual reading, to be perfectly reasonable and sound advice.

However, on closer examination his writings and recorded comments bear all the hallmarks of a classic Wavell manipulation of the truth. Wavell's subsequent writings on this subject, one written in September 1941 in the after action report he sent to the War Cabinet and the other a letter he wrote to O'Connor in 1945<sup>705</sup>, clearly demonstrate either his complete lack of understanding of how critical Neame's military situation in Cyrenaica really was or his inability to confront the unpalatable reality that he himself had created. The latter conclusion, it has to be said, being the more consistent with the known facts of the situation.

Wavell's 1945 letter tries to justify some of the earlier decisions he took and the orders he issued when he went to see Neame in March 1941. The beginning of the letter tries to justify his actions in the early part of Operation *Compass* giving weak and rather dubious explanations for his removal of 4 IID. However, the letter soon moves on to the reasons, as he saw them, for the loss of Brega and ultimately Cyrenaica. On page three of the letter Wavell, justifiably, blames himself for spending too much of his precious time in talks with Dill and Eden in Cairo when he should, perhaps, have been concentrating more on Neame's problems in the Western Desert.

'Eden and Dill arrived [he writes] immediately after the Benghazi battle, and kept me fully occupied, and I never had time to go out till, I think, about middle of March when it was rather too late'.<sup>706</sup> Wavell would, had he not been forced into urgent talks with Dill and Eden about Greece, the letter implies, have come out to see Neame much earlier. However, he was unable to do so, not because he did not want to, but because his crucial talks with Dill and Eden would not allow him to do so. This excuse for not

---

<sup>705</sup> Document 4/3/13 Liddell Hart Centre Kings College London: Letter dated 27 June 1945 sent by Wavell from Simla India to O'Connor.

<sup>706</sup> *ibid*

going out to see Neame earlier, at a time when it must be remembered that Neame was virtually pleading for support from his Commander-in-Chief, because of his urgent talks with Eden and Dill about Greece, seems on the face of it to be rather weak. Both Dill and Eden would have understood the need for the Commander-in-Chief to go and see his subordinate at this crucial time and indeed went with him to see Neame on 16 March. Moreover, Dill was a close personal friend of Neame's and was very pleased to go and see him. Furthermore, the move to Greece was not at this time, early March, in full swing and even if it had been there was very little Wavell could do directly to help or enhance the chances of its success. His discussions with Dill and Eden could quite easily have been postponed for a few days and nothing untoward would have occurred, as, in fact, nothing did occur which Wavell could materially alter or assist.

With the blame for his late visit to see Neame safely shifted away from himself and onto the shoulders of others Wavell then casually blames Wilson for his imperfect understanding of the terrain of Cyrenaica. 'From Maitland Wilson I had obtained a totally false picture of the escarpment running south from Benghazi and parallel to the coast, believing it to be similar to the land cliff running westwards from Sollum and thus impassable except at a few easily guarded points'.<sup>707</sup>

An escarpment such as the one at Sollum is a formidable obstacle to overcome for an attacker and a great advantage to a defender. The Sollum escarpment was, and still is, a high stony plateau, which stretches straight out into the desert before tapering out around Fort Maddalena. The great escarpment as it was known 'is some 600 feet high, it dominates the coastal plain from a few miles inland, and curves like a great wall down to the sea at Sollum'.<sup>708</sup> It consequently formed an almost impassable defensive barrier. Mobile troops equipped with adequate artillery give a defender, stood on the top of a high and steep escarpment with few passes up on to it, an easy task of beating off

---

<sup>707</sup> Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 249.

<sup>708</sup> Neillands, p. 33.

enemy attack. The defender can easily move his forces to block access up on to the escarpment via the passes. Moreover, the defenders mobile troops could move quickly down the passes to take the enemy in flank while his artillery could shell the almost defenceless enemy troops on the plain below them.

Unfortunately, the escarpment adjacent to Benghazi was nothing like as formidable as the one at Sollum. The escarpment overlooking Benghazi was a line of low gently sloping hills which everyone, except Wavell, seems to have known could be scaled almost anywhere along its length. Even had the Benghazi escarpment been as formidable as the one found at Sollum Neame could not take advantage of its qualities as he had very few mobile troops or artillery to carry out either defence or attack. The quality, or otherwise, of the escarpment above Benghazi was therefore militarily irrelevant to Neame's real needs and again it is hard to accept that Wavell did not know this.

Wavell was also extremely critical of Neame's tactical dispositions, which he described in his September 1941 report as "crazy". Neame, he claims, had placed 'a brigade of Morshead's 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division out in the middle of the plain between Agheila and Benghazi, with both flanks exposed, immobile with no transport, completely useless and an obvious prey to any armoured vehicles that broke through at Agheila'.<sup>709</sup> Wavell claims that when he discovered this "crazy" disposition he ordered Neame to move the brigade back to the escarpment east of Benghazi, 'where there was at least a defensible position'.<sup>710</sup>

This proposed redeployment is however; in view of what Wavell tells us he knew about the heights above Benghazi, which is that they were not formidable in the way the escarpment was at Sollum, a strange, and in many respects dangerous proposal. An enemy manoeuvre, which bypassed, and therefore out-flanked immobile troops on the

---

<sup>709</sup> Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 250.

<sup>710</sup> *ibid*

so called Benghazi escarpment, as the Australians would be if they conformed to Wavell's orders, made them just as vulnerable, if not more vulnerable, as they had been in their old positions. The British had just demonstrated the vulnerability of troops who found themselves in this vicinity when they had cut off the fleeing Italians a few weeks earlier at Beda Fomm.

As for the escarpment above Benghazi being advantageous for defence or attack this is plainly not the case. As the Australian brigade had little organic transport how could it manoeuvre if attacked, even if it was on the top of the escarpment? Furthermore, as the escarpment east of Benghazi was easily scaled almost anywhere along its length, as Wavell says he discovered, how could it be considered to be defensible.<sup>711</sup> Moreover, as the brigade in question had hardly any transport, artillery and no armour it could not possibly be expected to mount an attack from the escarpment.<sup>712</sup> So why, it might fairly be asked, did Wavell claim credit for this seemingly pointless and potentially dangerous redeployment.

Wavell, it must be remembered, wrote his report in September long after the disaster at Brega was over. He knew that the only reason the Australian brigade had been saved from annihilation in April was because of its earlier, mid March, rearward move to the Benghazi area. The Australians, had they been left out in the open without transport and inadequately supported, as Wavell quite rightly points out, would have been either outflanked and isolated or overrun by the German armour either way they would have been lost. The rearward move, supposedly ordered by Wavell, luckily placed the Australians in the Benghazi area when the Germans broke through at Brega. Consequently they could be evacuated before they were cut off, and like most other units attacked that March/April they eventually managed to reach the relative safety of the Tobruk perimeter where they were to play such a crucial, heroic, part in the defence.

---

<sup>711</sup> Buckingham, p.163.

<sup>712</sup> Fraser, p.148.



Wavell's order therefore, if it existed, would be seen as both a testament to his high tactical insight, military knowledge, and a vindication of his claim that Neame's original deployment was "crazy".<sup>713</sup> The inference is therefore that without Wavell's timely intervention the Australians would have been lost and consequently so would Tobruk. This sentiment is in fact confirmed by Wavell himself in his 1945 letter to O'Connor in which he says; 'I found that he [Neame] was proposing to place an infantry brigade in one long thin line from the sea to the escarpment south of Benghazi. It would have been completely sacrificed, as it had no transport. I ordered him to move it to the escarpment just above Benghazi, and thereby at least saved it from annihilation, and for the eventual defence of Tobruk'.<sup>714</sup>

However, Wavell's claim that it was he who ordered the redeployment of the Australians is highly questionable. The reason this brigade was in the position it was when Wavell belatedly arrived in Cyrenaica on 16 March was not because of some "crazy" deployment ordered by Neame but was rather as a consequence of the Australians Corps commander, Blamey, ordering that the complete and well equipped 6 AID should be replaced by the incomplete and poorly equipped 9 AID. Blamey felt, not unreasonably, that if he was to send troops to Greece as Wavell wanted him to do, who would almost certainly see action soon after they landed, then these troops should be the best equipped and the best trained he had available.<sup>715</sup>

Consequently as the first brigade of 9 AID arrived in Cyrenaica they naturally assumed the positions vacated by the brigade of 6 AID, which was in the forward position where Wavell claims he found them. The fact that this brigade of 9 AID had virtually no transport or heavy weapons was not, in early March, considered by Blamey or Neame to be a serious problem as they were not going to be attacked by Wavell's

---

<sup>713</sup> Lewin, p. 123.

<sup>714</sup> Liddell-Hart Centre Document 4/3/13 Wavell letter to O'Connor. .

<sup>715</sup> Raugh, p.143.

calculation until May by which time their deficiencies would, in theory, have been made good. For the time being they 'would be occupied in garrison duties only, and they would have a good opportunity to complete their training'.<sup>716</sup>

It had been intended to bring forward the whole of 9 AID where they were to be trained and equipped in the field. This plan was quickly found to be impossible as there was insufficient transport available to move or supply them and anyway only one brigade, the first to arrive which was now in the forward positions, had a near full compliment of even basic weapons. Therefore this brigade was left to support the British armoured force which, Morshead was reliably informed, would soon be deployed to the area. The other two brigades of 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division would be held in rear. One brigade in fact never came forward being left in Tobruk and the other brigade which only had two battalions and no guns was left in the Benghazi area.<sup>717</sup>

The detached brigade in the forward area, which Wavell says he had moved because of its "crazy" deployment by Neame, was, in fact, deliberately left where it was by the Divisional Commander of 9 AID, Morshead, to help support the anticipated British armour. However, it quickly became apparent to Morshead that the so called armoured unit his brigade was supposedly supporting (it was the motley collection of tanks assigned to 3AB which had not yet deployed to the forward areas and in fact never would) was a figment of someone's imagination. Consequently if his brigade was attacked, a prospect which almost everyone except Wavell thought was becoming daily more likely, it would be hopelessly exposed where it was. This exposure to enemy mobile forces was recognised by Morshead and in late February he wrote to Wavell telling him that the positions his Diggers were holding 'provided no more obstacles than a billiard table' and were therefore not the best place for non-motorized infantry'.<sup>718</sup> As

---

<sup>716</sup> Active Service, p.30.

<sup>717</sup> *ibid*, pp. 30/31.

<sup>718</sup> Heckmann, p. 92.

the authors of the Australian's official history *Active Service* say; 'By 19 March it was clear that at least the greater part of a German armoured division was in Tripoli. The prospect of one immobile and incompletely armed infantry brigade remaining opposite this force was disturbing, especially as only eight guns were supporting it'.<sup>719</sup>

The danger the Australian brigade was in if the German armour broke through the paper thin British defence line at Brega, which at that time was composed of a few armoured cars and a small detachment of anti-tank guns, was clear to Morshead. 'In consequence, orders were issued for the withdrawal of the detached brigade to the Er Regima area, east of Benghazi, where it arrived on 23 March'.<sup>720</sup> Morshead's re-deployment of his brigade to Er Regima undoubtedly saved the unit from annihilation not Wavell's claimed intervention.

It is beyond question that when the decision to move this brigade was taken, on 19 March according to the official Australian History, Wavell was not even in the area having returned to Cairo on 18 March. Moreover, had Wavell made a serious and informed appreciation of the tactical benefits of keeping any part of 9 AID in the forward areas in the state it was in, as he should have done, he could have come to no other conclusion than that keeping even one brigade of 9 AID in the forward areas made no military sense. Keeping any troops in the forward area who were unable to defend themselves was indeed "crazy".

## **WAVELL SAVES THE ARMOUR?**

Having claimed the credit for saving the Australians Wavell now turned his attention to claiming the credit for sounding the alarm over the state of Neame's motley collection of armoured forces.<sup>721</sup> Wavell wrote in September 1941 'the really alarming feature

---

<sup>719</sup> *Active Service*, p. 31.

<sup>720</sup> *ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>721</sup> Deighton, p. 299. Deighton says that by 3 April 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division had 'disintegrated to a point where it simply relinquished its tanks and joined the retreat'.

was the state of the cruiser tanks of 2AD, which were the core of the whole force. Out of fifty-two tanks, half were already in workshops and the remainder kept breaking down at intervals'.<sup>722</sup> However, again evidence suggests that Wavell's concern was created long after the defeat at Brega.

The unit Wavell is referring to is undoubtedly 5 RTR. At the time of Wavell's visit to Neame this was the only tank regiment with fifty-two cruiser tanks. However, this unit, as we have seen, was not even in the forward operating area between 16-18 March. Most of this unit was, in fact, four hundred miles behind the front at El Adem airfield on the outskirts of Tobruk when Wavell says he saw them. Nor were half their tanks at that time in workshops. Most of the fifty-two cruisers in 5 RTR were, in mid March, still operational. Where the real concern for Neame's armour should have been voiced by Wavell, had he seen them, was over the state of the other two regiments in 3AB, 3H and 6 RTR.<sup>723</sup> However, he fails to even acknowledge the existence of the other two units in the brigade. Nor is his inspection of any of the units in 3AB recorded in any of their unit war diaries. This event, had it happened, the G.O.C. visiting units in the field; would surely have been recorded in one of their war diaries, however, no mention of a visit is to be found in any of them.

Further evidence of Wavell's lack of knowledge about the state of Neame's armour at this time, is confirmed by his comments about the size and deployment of 2AD's HQ. Wavell says in his September report that he; 'was appalled at the size and unwieldiness of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Divisions headquarters. Gambier-Parry, though he only had one brigade to handle, [this is also incorrect as the Support Group Brigade was part of Gambier-Parry's division so he had two brigades to handle] had brought forward the

---

<sup>722</sup> Connell, p.386.

<sup>723</sup> Smithers, pp. 82/83.

whole of his headquarters, with the idea of getting them exercised in the field. All right if they were not attacked but a dangerous encumbrance if they were'.<sup>724</sup>

On this statement Jackson comments that it is surprising that when Wavell discovered the appalling state of 2AD in mid March he did not replace 'Gambier-Parry with a more experienced desert commander from 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, which was back in the Delta refitting'.<sup>725</sup> Raugh says of Wavell's tolerance of Gambier-Parry remaining in command when he allegedly discovered how bad things really were with 2AD on his 16/18 March visit that; 'had Montgomery or Slim made such a visit it is certain that, whatever the consequences, Neame or Gambier-Parry would have been out on his ear'.<sup>726</sup> So it might fairly be asked why indeed did Wavell not replace both Neame and Gambier-Parry if things were as bad as he thought they were with 2ADs HQ. The answer is simple. At this time Wavell could not have made a judgment on the suitability of Gambier-Parry's HQ as it had not yet been deployed.

When Wavell went to see Neame in March 2AD's HQ was still at Barce. Neame says that 2AD's 'HQ arrived eight days before Rommel attacked'.<sup>727</sup> As Rommel attacked on 31 March this gives an arrival date in the forward area for HQ 2AD of 23/24 March, five or six days after Wavell had returned to Cairo. Wavell could not have seen the danger that 2AD's HQ might be in if it was attacked because at this time they had not even arrived in the danger area.

Moreover, had Wavell really seen the state of Neame's armour and been as alarmed as he says he was by the deployment of 2AD's HQ surely he would have ordered, as he says he did with the Australian brigade, that it should be redeployed for its own safety. The obvious course of action would have been to seek to improve the state of Neame's armour by any means possible and insist on the removal from the forward area of the

---

<sup>724</sup> Connell, p. 386.

<sup>725</sup> Jackson, p. 95.

<sup>726</sup> Raugh, p. 121.

<sup>727</sup> Neame, p. 269.

unnneeded elements of Gambier-Parry's HQ. However, Wavell advised that none of these things should be done. In fact, he gave Neame no advice at all about what he should do to improve the fighting ability of his armoured forces, the state of which, he claimed, had "really alarmed him".

However, Wavell did give Neame some advice on his 16/18 visit and later gave him even more when he got back to Cairo.<sup>728</sup> While at Neame's Barce HQ Wavell instructed Neame that 'if his advanced troops were driven back, he was not to attempt the direct defence of Benghazi, but to pull his Armoured Brigade back on to the left flank of the Australians on the escarpment above Benghazi'.<sup>729</sup> In other words Neame's armour was to withdraw northward up the Via Balbia towards Benghazi.

There are several obvious problems for Neame in complying with this instruction. Assuming that the Australians made the move to the escarpment above Benghazi they would be, as they had virtually no organic transport, in acknowledged danger of being out flanked and cut off. Likewise, therefore, if any of the ramshackle tanks of 3AB retreated back to the same location as the Australians then they too would obviously be in the same danger. Moreover, as Wavell was, as he says, alarmed by the state of Neame's armour, which he thought had a fighting strength of only twenty-two tanks many of which were constantly breaking down,<sup>730</sup> how many tanks would it be reasonable, for even a layman let alone a military scholar like Wavell, to expect to successfully reach the escarpment?

As Wavell freely acknowledged 'the enemy would have local superiority both on the ground and in the air'.<sup>731</sup> The chances therefore of Neame's motley collection of tanks reaching the escarpment with any fighting ability were obviously so slight as to be

---

<sup>728</sup> Raugh, pp. 186/187. Raugh gives a detailed account of what Wavell told Neame on the 16/18 visit and in his 19 March note to Neame.

<sup>729</sup> Connell, p. 386.

<sup>730</sup> Raugh, p. 185.

<sup>731</sup> Connell, p. 386.

virtually non-existent, and indeed this proved to be the case. This conclusion was also evidently reached by Dill who said to Neame on the eve of his departure from Cyrenaica; ‘you are going to get a bloody nose here, Philip, and it’s not the only place where we shall get bloody noses’.<sup>732</sup>

## CAIRO REFLECTIONS

On his return to Cairo, however, Wavell suddenly had second thoughts about the advice he had given Neame. On 19 March, he dictated a detailed directive for Neame’s attention with subtle but important amendments to his original advice.<sup>733</sup> The new directive set out exactly what should now be Neame’s immediate tasks and how he should react if attacked. Neame’s armour was now not to retreat up the Via Balbia to support the Australians on the escarpment above Benghazi. ‘Having considered the alternative routes by which the enemy might advance, he advised Neame to keep his armour on the flank near Antelat, always flexible and ready to oppose and harass, to catch the enemy in rear and to manoeuvre him whenever possible on to concealed minefields’.<sup>734</sup>

This last instruction, to use his armour to manoeuvre the enemy on to concealed minefields, illustrates just how little, on 19 March, Wavell understood about Neame’s true position in Cyrenaica. Not only was Neame’s armour virtually useless, as Wavell says he knew all too well, he also had no mines to construct minefields even if he had been given the time and manpower to lay them. As for Neame’s armour being able to manoeuvre the enemy in any way shape or form this suggestion was utterly impossible for Neame’s forces to carry out. 3AB could barely manoeuvre itself and could certainly not push a German armoured brigade around.

---

<sup>732</sup> Neame, p. 268.

<sup>733</sup> Strawson, *The Battle for North Africa*, p. 52.

<sup>734</sup> Connell, pp. 386/387.

The tasks detailed above were obviously far beyond Neame's existing resources yet Wavell had still more chores for Neame's ramshackle little army to perform.<sup>735</sup> Wavell advised Neame that 'the enemy's supply and maintenance problem will be a most difficult and precarious one, and do everything in your power to render it more so'.<sup>736</sup> He advises Neame, as if he would not have been aware of the fact, that a sign of an impending attack would be the accumulation of stores by the enemy in the forward areas. These dumps Wavell advised 'should be attacked by air action as far as possible. Similarly, during the advance, attack on his maintenance system will be one of the best methods of brining him to a standstill'.<sup>737</sup>

Neame, it will be remembered, had virtually no air resources and only one bomber squadron under his direct command. The few extra bombers he did eventually received were only provided after the Germans had broken through the Brega defences. Neame could not order attacks on his enemy's dumps or maintenance systems without either a strong and well equipped armoured force or a strong bomber force, preferably both, and he possessed neither, and Wavell knew this.

Wavell was, however, by no means finished with giving his tactical advice to Neame. He next turned his attention to the possibility of improving the defensive positions around El Agheila. 'He asked Neame to consider the possible improvement of his Agheila positions by a forward, westward move to the salt marshes'.<sup>738</sup> He gives Neame this advice even though he admits that he had not reconnoitred the area personally.<sup>739</sup> He says in his September report when considering the value of the almost impassable salt marshes and sand seas between El Agheila/Mersa el Brega; 'If I had gone out there and seen for myself what a formidable defensive barrier they could be

---

<sup>735</sup> Lewin, p. 120. Lewin gives a review of the quality and quantity of Neame's forces.

<sup>736</sup> Connell, p. 387.

<sup>737</sup> *ibid*, p. 387.

<sup>738</sup> *ibid*, p. 386.

<sup>739</sup> Raugh, p. 186.



made, I think I should certainly have insisted on our pushing our forces down to these marshes, whatever the supply difficulties were'.<sup>740</sup>

His sudden enthusiasm for a stronger defence set up at Agheila/Brega, even though he had not seen the terrain personally, probably came from information received about the terrain from someone who had, possibly Chink. Again, however, his lack of understanding of the problems associated with defending Cyrenaica and his reluctance to seriously address these problems when the consequences of defeat in the area were so serious is breathtaking. The defensive possibilities of the Agheila/Brega defile, as this work has already reviewed in part and will review in depth later, were undeniably excellent. His negligent misunderstanding of the escarpment above Benghazi and his original instruction that 3AB should retreat on to it if it was forced to withdraw was, using his word, crazy. His failure to order Neame to exploit the defensive possibilities of either Agheila or Brega may be considered to be a grievous mistake.

Having given Neame extensive tactical advice Wavell now proceeded to give him more operational advice. He made it clear to Neame that his primary objectives were to one, inflict as much hurt on his enemy as possible before retreating and two to keep his forces, as far as possible, intact so that they could participate in the counter-attack when, at some unspecified date, this occurred. 'Neame had been instructed not to try to hold on to ground if attacked in strength but to fall back to previously agreed defensive lines'.<sup>741</sup> He was not to risk his army in an attempt to defend Benghazi. As Connell says, 'the infliction of losses and ultimate defeat of the enemy were of much greater importance than the retention of ground. It was not, Wavell said firmly, worth risking defeat to hold Benghazi'.<sup>742</sup>

---

<sup>740</sup> Connell, p. 384.

<sup>741</sup> Ian V. Hogg, *Armour in Conflict* (London: Jane's Publishing, 1989) p. 98.

<sup>742</sup> Connell, p. 386.

However, these statements raise some further puzzling questions; if it was not worth holding Benghazi, and the escarpment above Benghazi was of little military advantage, why deploy troops on to it to defend it as Wavell had previously recommended. There was in any case no possibility of defending Benghazi with the forces Neame had at his disposal.<sup>743</sup> Unless, of course, they were substantially reinforced. This brings us to Wavell's next piece of information for Neame.

Wavell now gave Neame some news he was longing to hear. Wavell listed what he considered to be Neame's most urgently needed reinforcement of troops and weapons. 'The immediate requirements seem to be to see what reinforcements we can make available of armoured troops, anti-tank guns, artillery, anti-aircraft; to build up properly distributed reserves; to see that we have sufficient means of defence such as anti-tank mines'.<sup>744</sup> All the things, in fact, that Neame had already told Wavell, on many occasions, he needed.<sup>745</sup> Wavell concluded his 19 March dispatch by giving Neame an explicit warning: 'Time is pressing and you must put all necessary moves and work in hand without the least delay'.<sup>746</sup> The question that must be asked here is; if Neame was not going to be attacked until May why must all necessary works be put in hand without delay?

The inference must surely be that by this point even Wavell knew that attack was imminent a conclusion that his RAF colleagues had also arrived at. The RAF commander in Cyrenaica; 'forming his own estimate from reconnaissance reports, and reaching his own conclusions of the Army's likely reactions, the A.O.C., Group Captain L. O. Brown, warned his units on March 22 to be prepared to move back at short notice.

---

<sup>743</sup> Rough, pp. 184/185. Rough gives a full breakdown of Neame's forces.

<sup>744</sup> Connell, p. 385.

<sup>745</sup> Neame, p. 273.

<sup>746</sup> Connell, p. 387.

It was a timely thought, but it did nothing to sweeten the pill of calamity soon to follow'.<sup>747</sup>

As for readying the defences in Neame's command area Wavell was of course stating the obvious; however, the recognition of his problems and the acknowledgement of his deficiencies must have been welcomed by Neame. Or perhaps it would have been if Wavell had actually sent him the reinforcements and equipment he needed. Or if he had received and read the message when it was intended that he should do so, unfortunately neither happened. No significant reinforcements or equipment reach Neame before the Germans attacked. Moreover, Neame did not receive Wavell's new written instructions in time to make any use of them, even if they had contained useful information, which they certainly did not. These new instructions were, according to Wavell, 'sent by air from Cairo on March 19, but these were somehow lost on the way, and Neame did not receive a copy till March 26'.<sup>748</sup>

However, this was all in the future and of little consequence to the formations of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division and the men of 2SG and 3AB struggling to make bricks with straw.<sup>749</sup> As mentioned none of Gambier-Parry's fighting units, post the Wavell visit, was making much progress in getting themselves battle worthy. It might therefore have been expected that after Wavell's visit and his professed alarm at the dreadful state he claims he found 2AD in that every muscle would now be strained to make these units fit for battle. Unfortunately for the hapless troops who made up these units this was not to be the case. It might be remembered that 3H and 6 RTR were both for the most part without useable tanks. It would therefore have seemed logical in view of the urgency of the situation that these units would be brought up to strength as soon as possible with whatever tanks could be readily and most easily made available.

---

<sup>747</sup> Terraine, p. 335.

<sup>748</sup> Neame, p. 268.

<sup>749</sup> Jackson, p. 95. For a breakdown of the tanks of 3AB

This was not to be the case. As previously mentioned 3H already had existing problems in becoming fully operational, which were the lack of a cruiser squadron and the wastage imposed on its light tanks by unnecessary patrolling. To these handicaps we may now add the third obstacle on its progress to operational status. The third, and perhaps greatest break on 3H becoming even partially operational, was the decision to give the regiment a cruiser squadron made up of Italian tanks. To the two squadrons of badly worn light-tanks already with 3H it was now decided that they should equip their third squadron with Italian M13/40 mediums captured at Beda Fomm.<sup>750</sup>

Just when the fitters of 3H were finally getting close to making a worthwhile number of their light tanks operational this good progress was thrown away. On 23 March the whole of 'B' Squadron 3H, now equipped with 13 reconditioned light tanks, was transferred to 6 RTR and became their 'B' Squadron. In exchange on 25 March 3H received 'A' Squadron from 6 RTR equipped, at least on paper, with 15 Italian cruisers.<sup>751</sup> The acquisition of these troublesome tanks so retarded the work of the fitters of 3H that they would now get hardly any tanks operational before the Germans attacked.

## ITALIAN TANKS

The Italian tanks being taken over by 3H and 6 RTR were M11/39s and M13/40s and they were it would be fair to say, less than effective as armoured fighting vehicles.<sup>752</sup> Robert Kershaw had this to say about the gun and armour of the M11/39; 'Italian 37mm guns on the medium M11/39 tank were only effective against British A10s and A13s at point blank range. Two-pounder Cruiser and Matilda tank guns could penetrate their

---

<sup>750</sup> Fletcher, p. 77.

<sup>751</sup> War Diary 3 Hussars WO 169/1385

<sup>752</sup> Verney, p. 50. Verney was to write: 'Some regiments were even mounted in Italian tanks – and so the sorry tale runs'.

frontal armour at normal ranges'.<sup>753</sup> Moreover, the 37mm gun fitted to the M11/39 was mounted in the hull not in a revolving turret this restricted the traverse to a few degrees either side.

In the quality of their armour Italian armoured vehicles also fell far short of their German and Allied equivalents. 'Their hulls were poorly constructed and they were not riveted like their British counterparts. As a consequence they could be torn apart on impact. Even heavy calibre machine-gun strikes might pepper the crews riding earlier models with tiny metal flakes coming off inside the thin armour'.<sup>754</sup> The armour plate was prone to crack or split when hit, and generally speaking, the deficiency in the quality of the steel was not compensated for by any added thickness. This was almost certainly due to the high sulphur content in the steel. In the Australian attack on Tobruk 'the vulnerability of the M11's was shown when fourteen of these enemy tanks were destroyed by the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion merely with the use of rifle and anti-tank rifle fire'.<sup>755</sup>

Italian tank crews tried to improve their chances of survival by sandbagging and fixing track links to vital areas, as did most tank crews, but this usually failed to save the Italian crews from destruction.<sup>756</sup> Indeed General Tellera in command of 10<sup>th</sup> Italian Army at Beda Fomm chose to ride inside an M13 and in the course of the battle had his head blown off by a British 2 pdr.<sup>757</sup>

Mechanically both types of Italian tanks were of a very poor design and had many inherent problems. Their Vickers-type suspension systems were of poor quality which

---

<sup>753</sup> Robert Kershaw, *Tank Men: The Human Story of Tanks at War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009) p. 141.

<sup>754</sup> *ibid*, p. 145.

<sup>755</sup> Active Service, p. 19.

<sup>756</sup> Hunt, p. 55.

<sup>757</sup> Farran, p. 68. Roy Farran, who had been ordered to extract the dead crew members from the knocked out Italian tanks after the battle of Beda Fomm, comments on one he came across; 'one tank was so horrifying that we left it to the last. Known to the troops as Madam Tussauds, it was an M 13 which had not caught fire when hit by a two pounder shell. Instead, the shell had whistled round the inside the hull to decapitate the four members of the crew, who were still sitting, headless, in their action stations'.

made them difficult to drive across rough country.<sup>758</sup> Their engine cooling systems were so inadequate that after ten or so minutes running they would overheat.<sup>759</sup> The lubricating system was so bad that it made the gears unbelievably stiff and difficult to operate.<sup>760</sup> Moreover, to add to all these problems the examples available to the men of 6 RTR were in a severely dilapidated condition having been left out in the open for weeks. Indeed as Fernyhough observes; ‘Italian M13 tanks were in fact so unsatisfactory that they earned the nickname of “self propelled coffins”’.<sup>761</sup>

Moreover, the work on the Italian tanks was a waste that could so easily have been avoided and it is surprising that Colonel Petherick and his fellow commanders should have allowed it to happen. It would seem obvious that priority should have been given to getting British tanks serviceable first and then if time and resources allowed work could commence on the Italian tanks. It was common knowledge that the Italian tanks were death traps and virtually useless and most everyone, except perhaps the new commanders now arriving in the desert, knew this to be the case.

Consequently from mid March, five weeks after Beda Fomm, until the Germans attacked on 31 March, the light tank strength of 3H hovered around the 30 mark, 22 short of establishment. As for the 15 Italian cruisers sent from 6 RTR to 3H no record exists of how many of these cruisers actually reached 3H. We know from the war diary of 6 RTR that several of the 15 M11/13s sent to 3H broke down on the way to Agedabia and no mention of their arrival at 3H base camp is made in their war diary. So it seems fair to assume that however many 3H actually received their contribution to the fighting ability of the regiment was negligible. Moreover, any that were deemed serviceable were, because of their inherent poor quality and lack of spares, in reality a hindrance rather than a help.

---

<sup>758</sup> Macksey, p. 126.

<sup>759</sup> Heckmann, p. 91.

<sup>760</sup> Farran, p. 72.

<sup>761</sup> Fernyhough, p. 143.

Turning now to 6 RTR we may see that they too were having problems getting their tanks serviceable. With the move of 'A' Squadron in progress, on 23 March, the personnel of 'B' Squadron 6 RTR were also moved, in Italian trucks, down to 3Hs leaguer near Agedabia.<sup>762</sup> They were instructed to take over 13 reconditioned British lights. It might be thought that this effort to get at least some tanks operational, the British light tanks could at least be made to travel even if they were virtually useless as tanks, was because it was now beginning to dawn on somebody that making the Italian tanks battle worthy was a bigger job than had earlier been anticipated and was just not worth the effort. However, this cannot be the reason as the crews of 'B' Squadron 3H, were, for some unknown reason returned in the Italian transport to 6 RTRs base near Beda Fomm. The intention was, perhaps, that they should take over some more of the Italian M13 cruisers. That being said, exactly why the personnel of these two Squadrons were exchanged at this time is unclear. It would seem on the face of it that both might just as well have stayed in their respective base areas and operated, or tried to operate, the tanks they respectively already held.

Nonetheless, the changes were made and the remaining men of 6 RTR, that is 'C' Squadron and HQ Squadron and their colleagues from 'B' Squadron 3H, now attempted to get some more of the troublesome Italian tanks into working order. This was to prove to be an unequal struggle.<sup>763</sup> Aside from the faults already mentioned other amendments needed to be made to get the Italian tanks operational. The British radios which were eventually fitted were found to need extra suppression to make them work properly. The engine oil in all the tanks needed changing, the fuel injectors needed calibration, oil filters required cleaning and all the drivers needed training.

Thus on the eve of battle most of 6 RTR found its self at its base near Beda Fomm seventy miles behind the expected battle front at Brega. Moreover, a more forlorn little

---

<sup>762</sup> War Diary 6 RTR WO 169/1415

<sup>763</sup> *ibid*

band of tanks it would be difficult to imagine. 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment now had their HQ Squadron with no tanks at all; their 'C' Squadron had 15 Italian cruiser tanks, but few of them were serviceable, their 'B' Squadron was from 3H with 13 light tanks but again how many were operational is unknown. Their 'A' Squadron was with 3H desperately trying to get some of the motley collection of Italian tanks they had into some kind of working order. Their own 'B' Squadron was not with the regiment at all but was making its way back to base with some more of the reconditioned light tanks given to them by 3H.

Even on the day after the Germans attacked 6 RTR's Squadrons were still either in their leaguer area or with other units, the war diary entry for 1 April informs us that "'A' & 'B' Sqns of the Regt being attached to 3rd Hussars. The Regt was located in the BEDA FOMM area (X.2080) completing its organisation and equipping of M13 tanks'.<sup>764</sup> The fighting strength of 6 RTR at this juncture was almost none existent; in fact, they were a liability as keeping this unit in the field consumed valuable resources which would very shortly be desperately needed elsewhere. Raugh gives the fighting strength of 6 RTR as '1 squadron only of 15-M13 Italian tanks'.<sup>765</sup> They probably had, as mentioned, a few lights working at the time of the German attack but whether any of the salvaged Italian or British A10 cruisers were in complete working order by that time is highly debatable and not very likely. Certainly none of any kind survived after 2 April and consequently this unit's contribution to the fighting strength of 3AB was negligible.

## 5 RTR

*In general, whoever occupies the battleground first and awaits the enemy will be at ease; whoever occupies the battleground afterwards and must race to conflict will be*

---

<sup>764</sup> War Diary 6 RTR WO 169/1415

<sup>765</sup> Raugh, p. 185.



*fatigued. Thus one who excels at warfare compels men and is not compelled by other men.* Sun Tzu<sup>766</sup>

While 3H and 6 RTR were struggling to get some of their tanks into some kind of working order 5 RTR was still kicking its heels on the outskirts of Tobruk at El Adem drinking Australian beer. This idyllic life, as mentioned, continued for most of 5 RTR until mid March when suddenly on 21 March they were ordered to join their 'A' Squadron already in the forward area. The war diary tells us that the Regiment was to move to join 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division in the forward area, a distance of approximately 260 miles. At this time HQ 2AD was still at Barce nearly 200 miles from the front line at Brega. Interestingly the war diary also gives us a tally of all 5 RTRs operational tanks, it states that HQ Squadron, had 6 A13s, 'A' Squadron had 11 A13s and 2 A10s, 'B' Squadron had 13 A13s and 2 A10s, and 'C' Squadron had 14 A13s and 1 A10. This gave the Regiment an operational strength of 44 A13s and 5 A10s, 49 tanks in all, only three short of normal establishment of 52.<sup>767</sup> This conformation of where and at what strength 5 RTR was on 21 March is important to note as it directly contradicts Wavell's claim that when he went to see Neame on 16/18 March half the cruiser tanks he saw were in workshops. Most of 5 RTR, several days after his visit ended, were still at El Adem, with only three tanks in workshops.

The above being said while the tanks of 5 RTR were mostly operational before the 21 March move, they certainly were not after it. This march proved to be almost suicidal for the tanks of 5 RTR. The first few days of the move were made in normal stages and no breakdowns are recorded. Then on, 24 March, the Germans took El Agheila which seems to have prompted an accelerated rate of movement. This accelerated march rate soon caused the Regiment problems. By 27 March the war diary was warning that; 'all tanks now in need of maintenance a considerable number

---

<sup>766</sup> Sun Tzu, Stone, *The Art of War*, p. 191.

<sup>767</sup> War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

showing signs of heavy engine wear'.<sup>768</sup> On 28 March the war diary reveals that only 28 A13 tanks are now serviceable.<sup>769</sup>

Instead of a staged and sedate approach march to their operational area, which Drew would normally have ordered to conserve track and engine life, the panic engendered by the German move caused the Regiment to be ordered forward at top speed. Jake Wardrop refers to this accelerated march thus: 'I don't know how it started, but one day we moved and it was the slickest bit of work we ever did. For four days the battalion covered a hundred miles a day over desert the wogs wouldn't go on. At the end of the trip we were facing the Agheila salt flats'.<sup>770</sup> Jake was not quite correct, 5 RTR was, in fact, about forty miles short of El Agheila. Their final assembly point was approximately five miles to the east and slightly north of the village of Mersa El Brega. Their operating base was with HQ 3AB who had set up camp halfway between the village of Maaten Bettafal on the western edge of the Wadi el Faregh. Divisional HQ was a few miles away at Bir bu Gedaria.<sup>771</sup>

Due to their forced march, by the time the Regiment reached its operational area it was a shadow of its former self. On 28 March the regiment's tank strength was down, as mentioned, to 28 A13s and no A10s. Moreover, of the remaining 28 A13s, quite a few were in need of urgent repair.<sup>772</sup> Consequently on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of March several more breakdowns occurred. Thus the final tally of serviceable tanks available to 5 RTR on 31 March seems to have been no more than 24. These were divided between three groups. The Regiments 'A' Squadron, with possibly 11 A13s, had already moved forward and were in direct support of the troops at Brega. The rest of the Regiment was with Brigade HQ at Maaten Bettafal. Thus on the eve of battle 5 RTR had no more than

---

<sup>768</sup> War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

<sup>769</sup> *ibid*

<sup>770</sup> Forty, *Tanks Across the Desert*, p. 45.

<sup>771</sup> War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

<sup>772</sup> Wilson, p. 38.

11 tanks at Brega, probably fewer, and perhaps 13 worn but serviceable tanks at their base. Woollcombe comments that both 3H and 5 RTR 'owing to constant breakdowns, worn-out tracks, battered engines and serious shortages of spare parts in the Middle East could muster no more than half strength'.<sup>773</sup> In both cases he is probably being over optimistic. The 5 RTR which only a few days before had been a fully operational unit was now virtually useless.

## **FINAL DISPOSITIONS OF 3AB**

On 31 March the three tank regiments of 3AB were spread out along a roughly seventy-mile north south axis at three different locations, Beda Fomm, Agedabia and the Brega area. In the far north around Beda Fomm lay the detritus of 6 RTR with their mix of Vickers lights, discarded A10s from 5 RTR<sup>774</sup> and Italian cruisers. This regiment had after weeks of work on a variety of tanks virtually nothing to show in the way of fighting potential for their efforts. 3<sup>rd</sup> Hussars were at Agedabia and like 6 RTR had been trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to get some of their motley collection of Vickers lights into working order and integrate the squadron of M13s from 6 RTR into their order of battle. They probably had somewhere in the region of 30 light tanks ready for action and perhaps 10 Italian cruisers.

The tanks of 5 RTR were at three separate locations. Most of the broken down tanks, about 20, were scattered between Beda Fomm and Agedabia. The rest of the Regiment was further forward with, as mentioned, part of one squadron directly supporting the troops at Brega. The remainder of the Regiment was on the left of the Brega position some five miles away with HQ 3AB. The combined tank strength of the two Squadrons in the forward area was probably 23 serviceable A13 cruisers and perhaps 2 or 3 with the unit but unserviceable. Raugh gives it that 5 RTR had 25 A13 Cruiser tanks. David

---

<sup>773</sup> Woollcombe, p. 84

<sup>774</sup> War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

Fraser tells us that in total 2AD 'could muster twenty-five light tanks and twenty-two cruisers, numbers reduced within days to single figures'.<sup>775</sup>

Thus 3AB's three regiments had, even taking the best estimates of serviceable tanks as accurate, no more than 75 tanks between them. The true figure will probably never be known but was almost certainly nearer to 50 rather than 75 and only half of these were gun armed. Moreover, 'the 40-mm. gun carried by the small band of British cruisers was outranged by the 50-mm. on the newer type of Panzer III which was present in the German 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division. The British cruisers, plagued by mechanical breakdowns, carried no high explosive shell for engaging the enemy's anti-tank guns, at this stage of the war, but only carried solid shot for engaging hostile tanks – if they could get in range'.<sup>776</sup>

Furthermore, despite the fact that they had been brigaded for six weeks, the units of 3AB had had no combined training whatsoever. They were spread out miles apart. Their Divisional HQ was completely unsuitable for the task it was about to undertake being established for European conditions not desert operations. Its Brigade HQ was stranded in a piece of sterile desert with virtually no contact possible with all its three dispersed regiments. 3AB was, in fact, thanks to Gambier-Parry and Rimington's efforts, weaker on 31 March, after six weeks of non-combat and supposed thousands of hours of maintenance work, than it had been on its creation in mid February.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> SUPPORT GROUP**

As we have seen previously prior to Wavell's visit to see Neame on 16/18 March very little had been done to bring the disparate elements of 2SG together. However, whether by coincidence or because of the mounting evidence of impending enemy attack, a few

---

<sup>775</sup> Fraser, p.150.

<sup>776</sup> Woolcombe, p. 92.

days after Wavell returned to Cairo, the various units of this brigade were slowly brought together and dispatched to Brega.<sup>777</sup>

The men of 9RB, who were destined to be the infantry component of 2SG, were, in mid March, as mentioned, in the Benghazi area trying to keep indigenous Arabs and Italian settlers from killing each other. The men of 104 RHA, the unit allocated to be the Brigades field artillery regiment, were also in the Benghazi area, unemployed and waiting to know where they would be going next.<sup>778</sup> For both units the waiting would soon be over. On 22 March orders were received at both HQs ordering them to move down to Brega and take over the defence of Cyrenaica. Late on 22 March, after leaving 'D' company of 9RB at Agedabia to prepare reserve positions, the three remaining companies of 9RB arrived at Brega.

Once at Brega they deployed alongside 'Y' Coy of 1NF and the armoured cars of 1 KDG. 'J' Battery, of 3 RHA with 9 towed 2-pdr AT guns, and 3 37L45 Bofors AT guns mounted portee, arrived a few days later.<sup>779</sup> These five units and the 11 ramshackle wrecks belonging to 5 RTR now constituted the total front line defence of arguably Britain's most valuable external military asset, Middle East Command. Nor would they have to wait long for confirmation that the enemy was at the gate. The first Rifle Brigade 'patrol, led by Jack Cope, identified Germans opposite the Battalion and soon afterwards the information was elicited that one German armoured division and part of another had moved up from Tripoli to join the forces already collected by the Italians near Agheila'.<sup>780</sup> The total German force confronting the defenders of Brega was not quite as strong as Hastings imagined.<sup>781</sup> However, as we shall soon see, it was quite

---

<sup>777</sup> War Diary HQ 2<sup>nd</sup> Support Group National Archives WO 169/1159

<sup>778</sup> War Diary 104 RHA WO 169/1431

<sup>779</sup> Dey, p. 9.

<sup>780</sup> Hastings, p. 62.

<sup>781</sup> Raugh, p. 185.

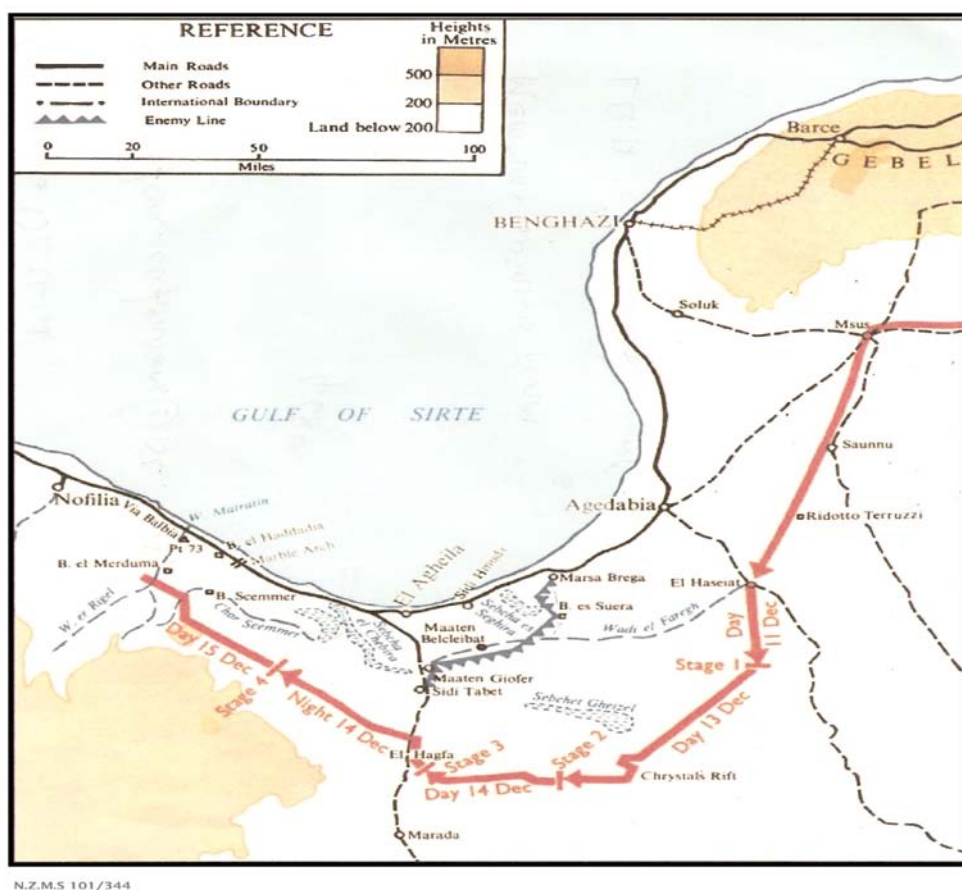
strong enough to overcome Gambier-Parry's disorganised, ill equipped and badly led Division.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLDING BREGA

The importance of holding the Brega position for the British cannot be over stated.

Once this easterly bastion was lost there was no natural or man-made obstacle to impede an enemy's progression westward towards Benghazi and ultimately, if the attacker desired and had the resources, Cairo and the Suez Canal beyond. David Fraser, comments on the importance of holding Cyrenaica in *And We Shall Shock Them* thus; 'Cyrenaica could be held against attack from the west by troops in position on the borders of Tripolitania, [Mersa El Brega] which was where O'Connor had reached.

782



This map shows the defensive capabilities of the El Brega Gap

<sup>782</sup> Major-General W. G. Stevens, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945* (Historical Publications Branch, Wellington: 1962). Found in the section by R. L. Kay, *The Left Hook El Agheila*, (Wellington: Historical Branch, 1950) p.26.

Immediately that position was surrendered, however, a defender was bound to be faced with the threat of a bold outflanking movement of the kind O'Connor had just performed in reverse. Such a move must cut off troops fighting "a delaying action back to Benghazi".<sup>783</sup>

This view is echoed by David Hunt who comments on defending Cyrenaica thus: 'A principle which was implicit in the Italian defeat was plainly demonstrated: that to lose a battle in the desert south of Gebel Akhadar meant the abandonment of the whole of the bulge of Cyrenaica, since the defeated side had nowhere to make a stand between Agheila on the west and the Gazala-Tobruk area on the east'.<sup>784</sup> Even Wavell realised the importance of holding the Brega position stating on 19 March that: 'If our advanced troops are driven from present positions there is no good covering position south of Benghazi as country is dead level'.<sup>785</sup>

The significance of the Brega position alluded to by Fraser, Hunt, Wavell and many others was not some theoretical "maybe" it was a cold military reality and even an untutored eye could clearly see that the consequences of allowing Brega to fall would make holding the rest of Cyrenaica virtually impossible. However, again unbelievably, Wavell, even though he knew the importance of holding Brega, had given Neame no instructions to hold this vital position. In fact, Wavell's orders were to abandon it if pressed. An order that Neame, even though he also must have known the dire consequences which would result if he abandoned Brega, amazingly accepted. As Jackson says: 'Neame was following Wavell's instructions to trade space for time but in abandoning the Mersa Brega position he uncorked the Cyrenaica bottle and allowed Rommel to use his numerical superiority once he was through the defile'.<sup>786</sup>

---

<sup>783</sup> Fraser, p.149.

<sup>784</sup> Hunt, pp. 58/59.

<sup>785</sup> Raugh, p. 187.

<sup>786</sup> Jackson, p.100.

## THE BRITISH DEFENCE. THE TERRAIN

In order to understand exactly what the British defensive positions at Brega comprised of a comprehensive review of the topography of the area will now be undertaken. Once the geographical and physical elements of the battlefield have been clearly established the dispositions of the various units involved in the defence will be placed in their respective geographical locations.

The two dominating features of the Mersa el Brega defensive position are the Mediterranean Sea coastline in the north, and a virtually un-crossable deep, high sided trench with huge almost vertical sides of thick sand, known as the Wadi el Faregh, in the south. The natural barrier of the Wadi el Faregh ran at this time almost parallel to the coast for approximately one hundred miles maintaining a distance from the coast of between fifteen and thirty miles. Travelling west the village of Brega is established near the coast about twenty miles from the western starting point of the Wadi el Faregh. At Brega the distance between the coast and the Wadi, the “Brega Gap”, is approximately eighteen miles.<sup>787</sup>

To block the “Brega Gap” Mother Nature had bestowed on those wishing to achieve this objective some very useful geographical assistance. Starting at the northern shore line and moving south the first geographical feature of assistance to the defender is a two mile wide strip of soft undulating sand dunes. This coastal strip of soft sand stretched along the shore line in either direction from Brega for hundreds of miles. The presence of these soft and steep sided sand hills made progression through this area, for both men and machines, very difficult and slow. The sand in the coastal strip was extremely soft and could, and did, penetrate the mechanical parts of all motor vehicles. It played havoc with mechanical and electrical equipment. Indeed all vehicles had to be fitted with improved water pumps and sand filters.<sup>788</sup> Tanks were particularly vulnerable and even short exposure to the fine sand soon impaired their performance.

---

<sup>787</sup> For a good overview of the Brega position and the terrain see Farran, *Winged Dagger*, p. 70.

<sup>788</sup> Neillands, p. 36.



The sand got into the sprockets on the track rollers and caused them to overheat and seize up. It blocked the engine filters and caused the motors to stall and overheat. Virtually every moving part of a tank was affected by the invasive nature of the sand. Turrets would refuse to rotate, guns would jamb, carburettors would choke and even electrical instruments would begin to malfunction.

As for the men the physical effort of struggling through the cloying sand carrying a pack and a rifle or worse still a heavy machine gun would exhaust even a strong man quite quickly. Consequently this stretch of ground, sand, was relatively easy to defend. The slow moving men and machines would make excellent targets for both mortars and artillery. Moreover, even if the enemy could not be hit directly just keeping him pinned down in the sand by small arms fire would eventually reduce his fighting capacity to insignificance.

The next significant geographical feature of the Brega position was the ridge upon which the village of Brega itself perched. Barclay tells us that; ‘the village of Mersa Brega itself lies at the northern end of the ridge’.<sup>789</sup> David Irving describes the village of Brega as ‘an Arab village straddling sand hills near the coast’.<sup>790</sup> The village consisted of a small collection of white washed houses, slightly elevated from the surrounding desert on a ridge. The ground between the village and the sea sloped gently downwards across the sand dunes and towards the shoreline, from where the inhabitants, long gone in 1941, launched their fishing boats.

The only road in the area, the Via Balbia, which was orientated at this point in its progression, almost exactly east west, paralleling the Wadi el Faregh. The road ran along the northern edge of the village approximately two miles from the coast. West of the village, ‘some 2,000 yards forward of the position was a small rocky hill, known as Cemetery Hill, which gave good observation over all forward posts on the position

---

<sup>789</sup> Barclay, p. 53.

<sup>790</sup> Irving, p. 69.

itself".<sup>791</sup> Further forward still, approximately 2,000 yards in front of Cemetery Hill, there existed the el Mineizla salt marsh. This marsh approximately one mile wide ran parallel to the road on the seaward side of the road for about two miles.

Moving two miles slightly south-west from the village the next geographical feature to be encountered is the vast Sebcha es Seghira salt marsh.<sup>792</sup> This feature roughly adjacent to the coast road was a completely impassable, two mile wide, by four mile long salt marsh. While this feature was totally impassable the ground in between Sebcha es Seghira and the village was not that much easier to traverse. Barclay describes the ground to the south of the road and west of the ridge as marshy.<sup>793</sup> The two miles, of relatively flat and low lying ground between the village and the Sebcha es Seghira marsh, was very difficult terrain to traverse either on foot or by vehicle. The whole area was, in fact, covered by a succession of small salt marshes interspaced by areas of extremely soft sand.<sup>794</sup>

On the southern side of Sebcha es Seghira moving still further south and slightly west we come to yet another impassable salt marsh the Bir es Suera. This marsh was, in 1941, swollen by exceptional winter rains. In early February when 7AD were making their way to Beda Fomm they experienced appalling weather conditions. Vehicles became bogged down in the desert mud and a considerable amount of time and energy had to be expended to retrieve them.<sup>795</sup> The weather was so bad and the mud so deep on 6 February that it took the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars a whole day to extract themselves from it.<sup>796</sup>

The Bir es Suera projected southward out into the desert and was, at this time, approximately ten miles long on its north/south axis and three miles wide on its

---

<sup>791</sup> Barclay, p. 53.

<sup>792</sup> P Kearey, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Geology* (London: Penguin Reference, 2001) p. 232. Definition of Sebcha [also spelt Sabkha or Sebkha] 'broad plain or salt flat in an arid or semi-arid region containing evaporites at a level dependent on the local water table'.

<sup>793</sup> Barclay, p. 53.

<sup>794</sup> Heckmann, p. 73. Johannes Streich who commanded the German troops at Brega said that there were only 8 miles available for manoeuvring between the sea and the salt pans.

<sup>795</sup> Barclay, p. 53.

<sup>796</sup> Clarke Dudley, *The Eleventh at War 1934 – 1945* (London: Michael Joseph, 1952) p. 152.

east/west axis. The distance between the southern tip of the Seghira and the northern edge of the Suera was approximately four miles. However, like the gap between Brega and the Seghira, the ground between the Seghira and the Suera was extremely difficult to cross with safety. It was like most of the desert in this area pockmarked by small salt marshes and soft sand.<sup>797</sup>

The final expanse of desert to be covered, if the whole Brega position was to be sealed, was the Suera/Wadi el Faregh gap, a distance of approximately seven miles.<sup>798</sup> This gap was without doubt the most difficult and problematical for an attacker going east west to get through. As with the other possible routes through the salt marshes and the sand seas further north this area had similar, but even worse, ground conditions. Moreover, anyone wishing to take this route would be nearly twenty miles from the road and the security of firm ground that it offered. Once stuck in this inhospitable region both man and machine would be in serious trouble and extremely difficult to rescue if attacked. Furthermore, if caught by hostile aircraft, as there was little or no firm ground to deploy anti-aircraft guns and no cover to hide in, both infantry and armour would be sitting ducks. However, we can eliminate this route from our possible access points as the Germans were sensible enough to know their limitations. No physical defence was needed for this route as at this stage Rommel's men were not desert worthy enough to attempt it.

So we may see that for all practical purposes all the defenders of the Brega position had to seriously defend was the approximately four mile gap between the sea and the southern tip of the Seghira salt marsh. The Suera/Seghira gap might perhaps need

---

<sup>797</sup> It must be remembered that all the distances given are "best estimates" based on maps and accounts taken from various sources and that distances involved and the size of the salt marshes and sand seas mentioned could, and did, vary, however, based on the available information the author is confident that the above gives a close approximation of the terrain in the Brega Gap in March 1941.

<sup>798</sup> For maps of the area see; Major-General W. G. Stevens, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945* (Historical Publications Branch, Wellington: 1962). Found in the section by R. L. Kay, *The Left Hook El Agheila*, (Wellington: Historical Branch, 1950), p.26. Also B. H. Liddell Hart, Editor, *The Rommel Papers* (London: Collins, 1953), p. Also map TPC H-4A Libya Produced by the Defence Mapping Agency. Revised 1995, FAA Distribution Division.

watching but it was unlikely that any serious attack would come from that direction because of the arduous ground conditions. As for the Suera/Wadi el Faregh gap this, because of the even worse going conditions, was even less likely to pose a threat to the defenders and indeed, as mentioned, was not even attempted by Rommel's troops.

Taking a more detailed look at the area to be defended therefore we may see that looking west the position had the village at its centre. On its right, northern flank, were two miles of sand dunes. On its left, southern flank, between the village and the Seghira there was a two mile succession of small sand saes and salt marshes. Therefore between the sea and the Seghira there was a four mile wide expanse of very difficult going comprising of a succession of sand dunes, salt marshes and sand seas. All of which were overlooked by Cemetery Hill in front of the village of Brega, which was itself set on a rocky plateau slightly elevated from the surrounding desert.

It is, therefore, perhaps little wonder that Rommel after surveying the potential defensive qualities of the Brega position said that; 'it was with some misgivings that we watched [British] activities, because if they had been allowed time to build up, wire and mine these naturally strong positions they would then have possessed the counter of our positions at Mugtaa, which were very difficult to assault or out flank'.<sup>799</sup>

## **DEPLOYMENT**

So what, it might be fairly asked, did the British do with their time at Brega.

Throughout early February and up to mid March various units deployed to the Agheila/Brega region, however, of the early arrivals only two units stayed until the attack on 31 March. The 1 KDGs were the first of the 31 March defenders to take up post. They had arrived in early February to relive the 11 Hussars and were used to patrol the Brega /Agheila defile.<sup>800</sup> Although the KDG were based at Maaten Bettafal five

---

<sup>799</sup> Liddell-Hart, p. 107.

<sup>800</sup> Fletcher, p. 77.

miles behind the village they had also established a permanent outpost at El Agheila, which they subsequently lost, and had created several small supply dumps along the sides of the many tracks running through the salt marshes.

The second unit to arrive were 'Y' Coy of 1 NF with their twelve Vickers Machine Guns. They deployed in and around the village. Most of their guns were sited on the left (south) of the village on the firmer ground and one section was placed on Cemetery Hill.<sup>801</sup> Between their deployment in mid February and the arrival of the Germans in late March these troops were accompanied by a variety of allied units. At first they had the company of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division's support group, 1KRRC and 2RB. These troops were followed by men from 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division. Then, when the 6<sup>th</sup> pulled out, they were briefly supported by units from Morshead's 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division. Lastly, and belatedly, on 22 March elements of 2<sup>nd</sup> Support Group arrived, 9RB and 104 RHA, and some time later 'J' Battery 3 RHA completed the final line up.

As the units of Brigadier Latham's Support Group arrived at Brega he assigned them to their various defensive positions in and around Brega. The infantry positions of Shipton's 9RB and the twelve medium machine guns of Captain Hensman's 'Y' Coy of 1NF were deployed as follows. Overlooking the road, and dug in on Cemetery Hill, were elements of 'A' Company, 9RB. Supporting the men on Cemetery Hill was Lieutenant Wells No. 12 Platoon of 'Y' Coy 1NF with three Vickers machine guns.<sup>802</sup> Behind this position were 'B' and 'C' companies and Battalion HQ of 9RB. They established themselves in a series of defensive locations some of which had been dug by the Australians in front of and to the north of the village, astride the road and in the sand dunes between the road and the coast.<sup>803</sup> The series of Australian trenches that 'B' and 'C' companies occupied were of a very high calibre. Each trench could accommodate

---

<sup>801</sup> Hastings, p. 62.

<sup>802</sup> Barclay, p. 54.

<sup>803</sup> Hastings, p. 62.

five or six men; they were deep and each had a firing step. To the rear of each trench there was an underground bunker where the men could sleep. The trenches were grouped in threes to accommodate a platoon of sixteen men.<sup>804</sup>

As the Australian unit which had previously been defending Brega were a Brigade size unit there were very many more trenches than Latham had troops to fill them as he only had one battalion not three. Moreover, as there were now only two Companies of infantry, 'B' and 'C', approximately 300 rifles, and the nine remaining Vickers Machine Guns to cover the four mile gap between the sea and the Seghira they were obviously spread very thinly indeed.

South and north of the road between the village and the first salt marsh were the remaining three platoons of Hensman's 'Y' Coy. One platoon was with 'B' company (commanded by Major M. G. Clayton) north of the road and the other two with 'C' company (commanded by Major Jack Andrews) south of the road. To the rear of the infantry were the 9 two pounder anti-tank guns of 'J' Battery 3 RHA. The whereabouts of the 3 remaining 37mm L45 Bofors guns of 'J' Battery, which were mounted portee, is unknown but they may have been kept as a reserve in the village.<sup>805</sup> The two batteries of Lt Colonel Todhunter's 104 RHA, 339 and 414 Battery's with their 16 25 pdrs, were in direct support of 9RB and 'Y' Coy INF. They emplaced their guns in two groups of eight guns approximately two miles in rear of the village. On Cemetery Hill 'A' Troop of 339 Battery set up an observation post (OP) and ran telephone cables back to the two battery commanders. Regimental HQ of 104 RHA with the 'B' echelon vehicles was approximately 5 miles further west of the main defensive positions with HQ 2SG at Maaten Bettafal.<sup>806</sup>

---

<sup>804</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview with author 14 January 2011.

<sup>805</sup> Dey, p. 9.

<sup>806</sup> War Diary 104 RHA WO 169/1431

For air defence the defenders had the 37<sup>th</sup> Light Anti Aircraft Battery with ten Bofors and two Breda anti-aircraft guns.<sup>807</sup> Their 'A' Troop with four Bofors guns was stationed on Benina airfield south of Benghazi over one hundred miles north of the Brega position. Their HQ and 'B' Troop also with four Bofors were deployed around the HQ of 3H near Agedabia thirty miles in rear of Brega. Their 'C' Troop was deployed with 1 KDG the two Bredas operating with the armoured cars and the two Bofors at Maaten Bettafal covering KDG HQ.<sup>808</sup> Consequently the forward troops in the Brega positions had no direct anti-aircraft cover whatsoever.

### **THE GERMANS TURN UP THE HEAT**

The Italian/German attempt to retake Cyrenaica began tentatively on 24 March with an attack on the KDG garrison stationed at El Agheila thirty miles west of the Brega position.<sup>809</sup> Having realised how potentially strong the Brega position could be made, if the British were allowed time to reinforce it, an objective Rommel felt they were bound to attempt as soon as possible: 'Rommel thought he would try an offensive move with what he had. His first aim was merely to occupy the Agheila bottleneck'.<sup>810</sup> The small detachment of British forces stationed at Agheila, a troop of KDG and an Australian anti-tank gun troop, was soon routed. Rommel recorded that 'the garrison, which consisted of only of a weak force, had strongly mined the whole place and withdrew skilfully in face of our attack'.<sup>811</sup>

There are several points about this encounter at Agheila that are worth mentioning here as they have relevance to the main encounter at Brega seven days later. Perhaps the first thing to be noted about the British defence of Agheila is the large scale use of mines. Minefields, as experience has shown time and time again, are a very effective and

---

<sup>807</sup> War Diary 37<sup>th</sup> LAA WO 169/1656

<sup>808</sup> *ibid*

<sup>809</sup> Delaney, pp. 13/14

<sup>810</sup> Hart, p. 119.

<sup>811</sup> Connell, p. 387.

relatively cheap way of both delaying an enemy's advance, and if he persists in forcing the field, inflicting casualties on his men and vehicles while he is doing so. All the defender needs to do is cover the minefield with a few machine guns which can then be used to prevent the enemy sappers from lifting the mines. However, in this particular case the enemy did not have to attempt the potentially costly task of gapping the minefield. Although the ground on either side of the road was mined the road itself was not. This meant that once the defenders had been forced to abandon the fort; all the enemy had to do was drive down the un-mined road and continue his advance, which of course is exactly what he did.<sup>812</sup>

Moreover, even if the troops in the fort had been able to hold the village area, all the enemy needed to do was to move north or south of the fort to find a way through the undefended minefields. Although the minefields were extensive they were not covered by machine guns or even infantry with rifles consequently all the enemy had to do was lift the unprotected mines. This would enable them to create a gap in the minefield which would then allow them to pass through and continue their advance or attack any defensive positions, such as those in the fort, in rear. Furthermore, once made safe the now captured mines could be redeployed by the captor to make any defensive position he may chose to establish more difficult to assault. Accepting that this is the case it is incomprehensible that the British did not either deploy some infantry to cover the minefields they had so painstakingly laid, or if they were incapable of doing this, lifting the mines and redeploying them where they might be of some benefit, such as at Brega. They unfathomably failed to do either.

As for Rommel's assessment that the British withdrawal was skilful it certainly did not look like that from the KDGs perspective. When the German 3<sup>rd</sup> Reconnaissance Battalion attacked Agheila in the early morning of 24 March they caught the garrison

---

<sup>812</sup> Delaney, p. 14.



completely unawares. Once the Australian and British troops realised that they were being attacked, and in superior strength, they put up little resistance preferring to evacuate the little fort they were sleeping in as fast as they could. 'Last to leave was the duty troop of the King's Dragoon Guards, the troop leader only getting out by the skin of his teeth'.<sup>813</sup> The withdrawal of the garrison at Agheila, virtually without a fight, had serious consequences for the British defence of Cyrenaica. Not only was it an indication to the enemy that the British were not, for whatever reason, defending Cyrenaica in strength, it also indicated that they were, perhaps, incapable of putting up any serious resistance.

The pathetic British defence of this easily defensible location tantalisingly revealed to Rommel many significant aspects of British un-preparedness. Did the absence of a strong garrison in this vital position indicate that the British were weak in the region? Was the lack of a covering force for the minefields a confirmation of this weakness? Moreover, where was the counterattack to retake this excellent defensive position?<sup>814</sup> As might be expected the ease of the capture of Agheila and the lack of any attempt to regain it, now emboldened the enemy. Once 'this significant position, considered 'the gateway between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica', was in German possession, Rommel boldly decided to exploit this unexpected windfall quickly, and a short pause ensued while the main bodies of the German and Italian units deployed forward'.<sup>815</sup>

When Churchill heard the news that the positions around Agheila had been abandoned, virtually without a fight, he was very alarmed indeed and cabled Wavell on 26 March: 'we are naturally concerned at rapid German advance to Agheila. It is their

---

<sup>813</sup> Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 254.

<sup>814</sup> Deighton, p. 297.

<sup>815</sup> Raugh, p. 188.

habit to push on whenever they are not resisted. I presume you are only waiting for the tortoise to stick his head out far enough before chopping it off".<sup>816</sup>

## THE GERMANS PREPARE FOR ATTACK

It might be expected that with Churchill's obvious concern and the fact that German troops were now incontrovertibly advancing down the Via Balbia towards Brega this would spur Wavell or Neame or both into action. However, astonishingly, Rommel's advance had virtually no stimulating effect on Wavell's or Neame's defence preparations at Brega. Wavell, in fact, decided to continue with a trip to Sudan and Eritrea which he had arranged sometime earlier. When Wavell returned to Cairo, on 27 March, he sent Churchill a remarkable telegram:

*A. P. Wavell to Prime Minister 27th March, 1941, 1905 hrs.*

No evidence yet that there are many Germans at Agheila, probably mainly Italians with small stiffening of Germans. I have to admit to having taken considerable risk in Cyrenaica after capture of Benghazi in order to provide maximum support for Greece. My estimate at that time was that Italians in Tripolitania could be disregarded and that Germans were unlikely to accept risk of sending large bodies of armoured troops to Africa in view of inefficiency of Italian Navy. I therefore made arrangements to leave only small armoured force and one partly trained Australian division in Cyrenaica.

After we had accepted Greek liability evidence began to accumulate of German reinforcements to Tripoli which were coupled with attacks on Malta which prevented bombing of Tripoli from there on which I had counted. German air attacks on Benghazi which prevented supply ships using harbour also increased our difficulties. Result is I am weak in Cyrenaica at present and no reinforcements of armoured troops which are chief requirement are at present available.

I have one brigade of 2nd Armoured Division in Cyrenaica and one in Greece. 7th Armoured Division is refitting and as no reserve tanks were available is dependent on repair which takes time. Next month or two will be anxious but enemy has extremely difficult problem and am sure his numbers have been much exaggerated.

I cannot however at present afford to use my small armoured force as boldly as I should like. Steps to reinforce Cyrenaica are in hand. I hope fall of Keren will release some troops from Sudan before long and that I shall also get some South African troops from East Africa. You know our difficulties about aircraft.

---

<sup>816</sup> John Strawson, Quoting Churchill in, *The Battle for North Africa*, p. 48.

Longmore and his people give me magnificent support everywhere but there is never quite enough of them. My own chief difficulty is transport.<sup>817</sup>

The contents of this telegram are nothing short of breathtaking. They confirm, if confirmation at this stage were needed, that Wavell was completely out of touch with the true situation in Cyrenaica. His opening statement that there was no evidence that there were many Germans at Agheila and that the troops that were there were probably mainly Italians with a stiffening of Germans is complete nonsense. On 19 March Wavell had received Ultra intelligence which had prompted him to report to the War Office that: 'Situation on Cyrenaica front is causing me some anxiety as growing enemy strength may indicate early forward movement'.<sup>818</sup> Moreover, the first patrol sent out by 9RB from Brega, on 22 March, established positively that German troops were on their front.

Furthermore, his subsequent prediction that enemy numbers were much exaggerated is contradicted by aerial observation which clearly identified hundreds of vehicles leaving Sirte and heading for El Agheila. Moreover, the garrison at Agheila was evicted on 24 March by a complete battalion of German troops, clearly identified by the KDG unit who were there.<sup>819</sup> Also, on 25 and 26 March patrols of the KDG encountered and reported that they had been in contact with German eight wheeled armoured cars.<sup>820</sup> Indeed on 29 March they discovered a German motor column moving south towards Marada and destroyed it.<sup>821</sup> So although the precise number of enemy troops was perhaps uncertain; what was certain was the fact that there were a considerable number of enemy forces between Nofilia and El Agheila.

The rest of this telegram is even more astonishing and difficult to accept as true. Wavell admits, so he says, to taking considerable risk in Cyrenaica in order to send

---

<sup>817</sup> Connell, p 388.

<sup>818</sup> Raugh, p. 187.

<sup>819</sup> Delaney, pp. 13/14.

<sup>820</sup> War Diary 1 KDG WO 169/1384

<sup>821</sup> National Archives Document CAB 16/17/32 report on actions of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division

maximum support to Greece. To defend Cyrenaica therefore he says he arranged to leave only small armoured force and one partly trained division. 'Result is I am weak in Cyrenaica at present and no reinforcements of armoured troops which are chief requirement are at present available'.<sup>822</sup>

Wavell knew that the Germans were sending troops to Libya in early February. The reason he was weak in tanks in Cyrenaica was not because he had no tanks, or because he had sent most of what he had to Greece, but because all the serviceable cruiser tanks in the forward areas had been sent back, on his orders, to the Delta.<sup>823</sup> Once back in the Delta, because he was convinced that there would be no attack in the Western Desert until May, even though there was mounting evidence to suggest that this estimate was wrong, little was done to speed up their repair and delivery to Neame.<sup>824</sup>

Therefore, because of Wavell's arbitrary decision that the Germans would not attack before May there had been little or no effort made to get any of the hundreds of tanks now stuck in workshops in the Delta serviceable and send them forward to reequip either 3H or 6 RTR. Wavell himself admits that he knew the tank situation in the Western Desert was dire when he came back from his 16/18 March visit to Neame but did absolutely nothing, as mentioned, to remedy the tank shortage by speeding up repairs to the tanks in the Delta.

Moreover, Wavell further claims that armoured troops were Neame's chief requirement. However, what Neame really needed was more artillery, anti-tank guns, anti-aircraft guns and infantry. In regard to the amount of anti-tank guns Neame had, one battery of twelve guns, this was way below what would normally be considered adequate to repulse an armoured brigade.<sup>825</sup> Wavell had, in fact, artillery available in some quantity, and did, as

---

<sup>822</sup> Connell, p. 388.

<sup>823</sup> Wilson, p. 64. Wilson tells us that after Beda Fomm 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division returned to the Delta to refit.

<sup>824</sup> John Keegan, Editor Ian Beckett, *Churchill's Generals* (London: Cassell Military, 2005) p. 78.

<sup>825</sup> Delaney, p. 11.

we shall see later, dispatch several units to Neame, but only when it was too late for them to be of any help. Furthermore, he claims that he has no spare air resources to help Neame but again, as we shall see when it was too late for them to be of any real assistance to Neame, he suddenly finds extra squadrons.

### **30/31 MARCH DEPLOYMENT: THE TAKING OF BREGA**

When Lieutenant Colonel Freiherr von Wechmar's 3<sup>rd</sup> 'Reconnaissance Battalion took El Agheila on 24 March with ease, and the British withdrew to 'Mersa el Brega without a fight, Rommel decided to press on. Rommel considered that Brega was an ideal position to defend against a possible British attack as well as being a good 'jumping off' place for any assault on Cyrenaica'.<sup>826</sup> With El Agheila secure Rommel began preparations for his next move. Thousands of troops and massive quantities of supplies were brought forward. A huge dump was established a few miles west of Agheila at Arco dei Fileni.<sup>827</sup> By 30 March Rommel had thirty seven thousand Italian and nine thousand three hundred German troops available in the forward areas.<sup>828</sup> The cutting edge of this force was the German 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division with a formidable array of fighting units.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division although it was an improvised unit with no experience of desert conditions, was nevertheless, a formidable fighting force. Its main armoured component was Panzer Regiment 5 with 155 tanks.<sup>829</sup> It had an armoured reconnaissance unit, 3<sup>rd</sup> Recce Battalion; two machine-gun battalions, No's 2 and 8, each with its own engineers. In artillery they had a 12-gun battery of field artillery, Regt 75; and two anti-aircraft units, AA Bns 605 and 606; two motorised anti-tank gun battalions, 33 and 39, and armoured troop-carrying vehicles. Supporting these units was

---

<sup>826</sup> Forty, p. 116.

<sup>827</sup> Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 257.

<sup>828</sup> Delaney, p. 14.

<sup>829</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, p. 82.

a company of engineers from Engineer Battalion 39. Amongst the anti-tank or 'tank-hunting' battalions, were a few 88-mm guns.<sup>830</sup>

The Italian forces available to Rommel were 'the Trento Motorised Infantry Division and the Ariete Armoured Division with approximately 60 tanks. Also available was the Italian X Corps, made up of the Pavia and Brescia Infantry Division's'.<sup>831</sup> This gave Rommel an attacking force of nearly fifty thousand troops and over two hundred armoured fighting vehicles. It will be remembered here that the British garrison at Brega was approximately one thousand five hundred men strong with 12 anti-tank guns, 16 artillery pieces and perhaps 11 working tanks.

## THE BATTLE BEGINS

Throughout the daylight hours of 30 March the German and Italian forces allocated to the attack on Brega assembled around the old fort and water point at El Agheila. In the early morning of 31 March the attacking infantry and artillery men boarded their trucks and set out on the thirty or so mile voyage down the Via Balbia to their forming up area in front of Brega.

The German armour also set out from El Agheila at the same time but on two divergent courses.<sup>832</sup> The main group of German armour headed east along the Via Balbia in support of the infantry and artillery. However, there was a smaller group of tanks which turned right off the Via Balbia and headed south east towards Maaten Giofer (Maaten meaning shallow well in Arabic) on the so called Agheila/Giofer track.<sup>833</sup> Once there they were to turn due east and head towards Brega through the gap between the Seghira and Suera salt marshes. Their objective was to confront any British

---

<sup>830</sup> Terry Gander, *The German 88* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009). For a full account of the effectiveness of the 88 see Gander.

<sup>831</sup> Delaney, p. 14. See also Verney *Desert*, p. 51. Also John Strawson *The Battle for North Africa*, p. 48.

<sup>832</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, p. 116.

<sup>833</sup> Heckmann, p. 67.

armour which might be in the Maaten Giofer area, to overcome it, and then to outflank the British positions at Brega.<sup>834</sup>

As the smaller column of German tanks approached the Maaten Giofer track, turning off the Via Balbia, their suspicions about the presence of British armour in the salt marshes was soon confirmed.<sup>835</sup> It is perhaps fitting, and perhaps not surprising, that the first troops to encounter the Germans on the early morning of 31 March 1941 were men from the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars. A detachment of Troopers from 11H had been attached to the KDGs probably with a two fold intention. One objective would be to give the KDG troops advice on how to operate armoured cars, the KDG had up until January 1941 been a horsed regiment, and consequently had plenty to learn about fighting in armoured cars. The second objective might well have been for the men of 11H to gain experience on the Marmon Harrington armoured cars which they themselves would soon be acquiring. However, whatever the reasons for their attachment to the KDG the men of 11H were, on the night of 30/31 March, out on an all night reconnaissance patrol observing enemy activity. Their orders were to keep watch on the German troops who had occupied their former accommodation in the old fort at El Agheila.

To facilitate these orders they had parked their armoured car in a depression which kept them partially hidden from observation by the rolling sand dunes. Lieutenant Fred ‘Dusty’ Miller a nineteen year old newcomer to the desert was accompanied by Lieutenant James ‘Nobby’ Clark a veteran who had been responsible for capturing Italian General Annibale Bergonzoli, nicknamed “Electric Whiskers,” in early February.<sup>836</sup> From the top of a sand dune they duly observed the fort and all seemed to be quiet and looked to remain so. Therefore they decided to go and eat and then, if it remained quiet, get some sleep. On their return to the car their driver, ‘Private Felton,

---

<sup>834</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, p. 117.

<sup>835</sup> Paul Carell, *The Foxes of the Desert*: translated from the German by Mervyn Savill (London: Macdonald, 1960) p. 8.

<sup>836</sup> *ibid*

had prepared a concoction of exotic food that even now, months after first tasting it, remained unusual fare for young Britons: captured Italian spaghetti, tinned cherries and Parmesan cheese. Felton had filled every spare space in the armoured car with these luxuries on 7 February when Benghazi had fallen'.<sup>837</sup>

After their meal the men huddled in their blankets under the armoured car and went to sleep. Their sleep, however, was soon rudely interrupted. 'The clank of tank tracks... Then silence and an oath. Fred Miller was on the alert, but there was no need for him to wake the others. Clark, too, was peering out from under the scout car. They lay on their bellies and stared ahead at the mighty shadows, which rattled as they moved. They heard shouts. "Tanks," whispered Miller, "German tanks."'<sup>838</sup>

Lieutenant Clark's patrol had been spotted by elements of Colonel Freidrich Albrich's 5<sup>th</sup> Panzer Regiment on their way to Brega on the southern track. In record time the four men were back in the armoured car and Felton roared off into the early morning gloom and safety. 'Dawn began to break on an historic morning. "German tanks on the coastal road" James Clarke shouted to the commander of a reconnaissance unit which lay in front of Brega'.<sup>839</sup> Once they had lost the pursuing German tanks Clark raised the alarm with the first allied unit he came across, however, by this time other watchers on the desert floor were also aware of the German presence.

As the Germans were carrying out these early morning manoeuvres the British were also up early. From their base at Maaten Bettafal approximately five miles in rear of their Brega positions, at first light on 31 March, HQ 3AB ordered a small patrol to be sent forward to Maaten Giofer. Whether this patrol was sent as a result of Clark's warning or was just a routine patrol to watch the passes through the salt marshes and sand seas to the south of the Via Balbia and to observe the road itself, is not clear. No

---

<sup>837</sup> Lyman, p. 91.

<sup>838</sup> Carell, p. 8.

<sup>839</sup> *ibid*



mention of the alarm being sounded is found in either war diary. However, whatever the reason the patrol headed out westward into the salt marshes. This small British force consisted of six Cruiser tanks from 'A' Squadron 5 RTR commanded by Major T. K. D. Pritchett and two KDG Patrol groups each made up of three armoured cars belonging to 'A' Troop KDG. No 1 Patrol being commanded by Lt Budden and No 2 Patrol commanded by Lt Whetherly.<sup>840</sup>

Once underway, however, it was not long before two of the Cruisers developed mechanical problems and had to return to base. The remaining four tanks and the armoured cars carried on with their mission. The surviving Cruisers and No 2 Patrol headed west for Maaten Giofer while No 1 Patrol moved north towards the Via Balbia.<sup>841</sup> Having reached the Maaten Giofer area Pritchett also turned his force north. This placed Pritchett on a direct collision course with the German armour heading south which had just had its brush with Clark. The two groups met, according to the war diary of 1 KDG, at about 6:30 a.m. This meeting instigated a sharp little fire fight with both sets of tanks and the armoured cars firing enthusiastically at each other but with no discernable result.

As this encounter was taking place Lt Budden the commander of No 1 Patrol<sup>842</sup>, some miles to the north/east of the Maaten Giofer battle, reported to Pritchett that he could see vehicles moving east on the Via Balbia. This was, in fact, the main German Battle Group heading for Brega although neither Budden nor Pritchett probably realised this at the time. This news prompted Pritchett to break off from fighting the southern group. His intention seems to have been to move up towards the Via Balbia via the tracks they had already reconnoitred through the salt marshes and come up in rear of the German column on the Via Balbia. Budden, in an effort to conform to this plan, also

---

<sup>840</sup> War Diary of 1 KDG WO 169/1384

<sup>841</sup> Heckmann, p. 67.

<sup>842</sup> *ibid*

moved his Patrol through the salt marshes towards the German column on the road. While the British armour was carrying out this manoeuvre the German tanks on the Agheila/Giofer track turned east and continued their advance towards Brega.

In the marshes Budden and his cars were now drawing closer to the German column on the road. As he got closer however he soon realised that the column was far too strong for him to attack even with the rest of the Troop. The German and Italian column which Budden had discovered was, in fact, composed of over 2,000 wheeled vehicles and some 200 tanks and stretched for nearly twenty miles. Although Budden did not know how strong the column was at the time he realised that it was a substantial convoy. Consequently he radioed this information back to Pritchett, who, after digesting this information, decided to break off the pursuit and report back to HQ.

However, just as Pritchett was deciding what to do next some of the German tanks he had engaged earlier arrived on the scene.<sup>843</sup> This prompted a resumption of the fight which had started earlier. Again, however, the engagement did not last long. Shortly after battle commenced, according to the war diary,<sup>844</sup> one of Whetherly's armoured cars was hit and destroyed and one of Pritchett's Cruisers was hit on the turret ring and consequently could not move its gun.<sup>845</sup> This prompted Pritchett to withdraw from the battle and his tanks and Whetherly's remaining cars retreated back to Brega. Budden and his Patrol were left in the salt marshes to watch the road. Subsequently they sent back many most valuable reports on enemy activity until they themselves withdrew later in the day.

This concluded 1 KDGs involvement in the battle for Brega. Why they were not sent back into the salt marshes in strength, perhaps with the 3 portee Bofors anti-tank guns of 'J' Squadron 3 RHA is left unrecorded. The appearance of thirty armoured cars and

---

<sup>843</sup> War Diary of 1 KDG WO 169/1384

<sup>844</sup> *ibid*

<sup>845</sup> War Diary of 5 RTR WO 169/1414

three anti-tank guns, which were equipped with white phosphorous shells which were deadly to soft skinned vehicles, might, in its self, have been enough to halt the German/Italian attack. However, no such orders were given. Consequently 1 KDG now spent, apart from Budden and his Patrol in the marshes, the rest of the day as passive observers of the battle not participants. They eventually withdrew completely with other retreating units later that evening.<sup>846</sup>

As the skirmish between the armoured cars was being fought out in the salt marshes the German infantry and guns on the road were closing up to their jump off areas in front of Brega. The main German force of guns, tanks and infantry formed up on the south side of the Mineizla salt marsh. They assembled on solid ground around Maaten Bescer which, as mentioned, was about 2,000 yards in front of Cemetery Hill. However, a smaller force composed of Machine Gun Battalion 2 with some engineers and anti-tank gunners approached Brega on an even more southern track. This group, however, failed to reach Brega as they were delayed most of the day trying to negotiate the adverse going south of the Mineizla.<sup>847</sup>

The first contact between the Germans who had advanced down the Via Balbia and the British forces deployed in front of Brega occurred when the German forward troops advanced from Maaten Bescer. At about 8:00 a.m. the carriers of 'C' Company commanded by Jack Andrews were attacked by a combined force of armoured cars, motor cycle troops and tanks.<sup>848</sup> This confrontation caused the outnumbered and outgunned Andrews and his carriers to retreat back behind Cemetery Hill. Andrews's withdrawal allowed the Germans to close up to Cemetery Hill on the seaward side and gave them clear observation of the British positions in front of Brega.

---

<sup>846</sup> Heckmann, p. 67.

<sup>847</sup> Playfair, p. 25.

<sup>848</sup> Hastings, p. 63.

Occurring simultaneously with the attack from Maaten Bescer on Andrews; the Germans also deployed troops into the sand dunes north of the road. Corporal Otto Ruprecht, who was in charge of a German machine gun section, moved his men forward through the sand dunes and established them in positions about half a mile west of Brega. While Ruprecht and his men were making their advance through the sand dunes the German artillery men were busy setting up their guns in positions in rear of the infantry.

Once the guns were set up the order was quickly given to open fire.<sup>849</sup> The shells from the German artillery slammed into the buildings of the village blowing them to pieces and setting many on fire. German shells also fell on the British trenches in front of Brega. On the receiving end of these shells were the men of 'B' company and their supporting machine gunners. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant David Hurst-Brown's platoon was badly hit, several men were killed or wounded and two of the machine guns were knocked out completely by direct hits.<sup>850</sup>

Shortly after the artillery opened up the air filled with German dive-bombers. 'Stuka dive-bombers climbed towards the top of the sky, paused, and plummeted like diving hawks screaming in elemental fury at the town'.<sup>851</sup> The British infantrymen ran through the exploding rubble strewn streets looking for cover. Next 'German machine guns began chattering like angry woodpeckers. Desperate enemy soldiers were scrambling to find shelter from searching bullets and pirouetting like drunken ballet dancers when shot. The rattling guns continued sweeping the township with deadly fire'.<sup>852</sup> This initial softening up of the British outpost on Cemetery Hill and the positions in front of the village lasted for nearly an hour.

---

<sup>849</sup> Otto Ruprecht <http://www.thecheers.org/.../article-2374-Mersa-El-Brega.html>-United States

<sup>850</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

<sup>851</sup> Otto Ruprecht

<sup>852</sup> *ibid*

Then at about 9:00 a.m. the men of the outpost company on Cemetery Hill saw enemy armour advancing towards them. At 9:20 a.m. 104 RHA HQ intercepted a message from HQ 2SG informing them that they could now see armoured fighting vehicles and lorries approaching. These German forces were most likely the engineers of Ponath's Machine Gun Battalion 8.<sup>853</sup> At 9:25 a.m. HQ 2SG now reported that they had received information, probably from Budden, that 200 AFVs were moving east of Cheduet El Adem on the Via Balbia. The report added that 5 AFVs and 4 lorries were moving east 6 miles west of Brega. This report is obviously incorrect as it would have put the Germans into the HQ area of 2SG. What the diarist is almost certainly reporting is the German tank detachment south of Brega emerging through the Seghira/Suera gap. This report was followed at 9:30 a.m. by more news on enemy activity from the 104 RHA observation post on Cemetery Hill. They reported that they could now see enemy troops on a strip of white sand about three miles from their observation post.<sup>854</sup>

The Germans had now brought forward enough troops and guns to make a concerted attempt to take Cemetery Hill. Advancing from both the sand dunes and up the road supported by their artillery and Stuka attacks the German troops slowly forced the defenders to evacuate their positions on Cemetery Hill. At 10:15 a.m. 'A' company of 9RB retreated back to the main defensive positions in front of the village. They left behind the observer of 104 RHA, one platoon of infantry and the carriers to delay the Germans. These troops somehow managed to hold on for a further half hour.

At 10:40 a.m. the 104 RHA observer, via a request from the infantry commander, asked for artillery support to help cover the final evacuation of Cemetery Hill. This is the first recorded intervention from the guns of 104 RHA. They now fired three times onto Cemetery Hill 50 rounds per gun.<sup>855</sup> It is unclear how many guns were involved in

---

<sup>853</sup> Schmidt, p. 27.

<sup>854</sup> War Diary 104 RHA WO 169/1431

<sup>855</sup> *ibid*

this shoot but if it was a Regimental shoot this would indicate that 800 rounds of high explosive shells hit Cemetery Hill. This bombardment by the 25 pdrs was for the German troops underneath it ‘unpleasantly accurate. Two Panzer attacks were thrown back. Although the high-explosive shells were ineffective against the German armour, direct hits were enough to tear the tracks off the bogeys and to give the crews a nasty shaking’.<sup>856</sup>

In an effort to silence the British guns Streich ordered in another air raid by Stuka dive-bombers.<sup>857</sup> For the British gunners this must have been a frustrating and terrifying experience as they had nothing to fight off the dive-bombers. It will be remembered that all the anti-aircraft guns available were deployed away from the actual fighting area. Consequently when the dive bombers left the German infantry pressed home their attack. Despite the strength of the shoot and the resilience of the gunners they failed to stop the Germans occupying the Cemetery Hill positions. This German victory had, however, not been won easily. Although the British did not know it the Germans were at this stage becoming extremely apprehensive about their chances of taking Brega. The resistance had been far stronger than they had anticipated. Indeed there is evidence which suggests that had a coordinated counterattack been organised by the British with infantry, artillery and tanks, which were all available in the near vicinity, then the Germans might have been repulsed.<sup>858</sup>

The idea of a counterattack was, in fact, contemplated by Brigadier Latham. Although no record survives of exactly when Latham received the unpleasant news that Cemetery Hill had fallen we do know that once he had the information he reacted quickly. At 10:45 a.m. it is noted in the war diary of 104 RHA that ‘Brigadier wants

---

<sup>856</sup> Heckmann, p. 72.

<sup>857</sup> *ibid*

<sup>858</sup> *ibid*

Cemetery Hill reoccupied'.<sup>859</sup> It was, however, not to prove possible; the war diary of 104 RHA announces at 10:50 a.m. that their forward observation post reports that the German infantry and tanks are now north of the road in front of Cemetery Hill in some force and that there is a considerable amount of transport on the Via Balbia.

With the positions on Cemetery Hill now taken by the German infantry there was a short pause while Rommel moved his tanks forward. At about mid day the German attack was resumed. German tanks and infantry attacked the main infantry defences manned by the remains of the 9RBs in front of Brega. The British infantry, however, stood to their guns and a furious fire fight developed. Hurst-Brown and his remaining men fired down on the advancing German infantry receiving in return a hail of machine gun bullets. Several of Brown's men were again wounded including Brown himself. A bullet hit the wooden stock of his rifle smashing it and sending a splinter through two of his fingers.<sup>860</sup> It was at this point that 'C' Squadron of 5RTs, which had been hurriedly added to the defence, now tried to give the hard pressed infantry some help. The British tanks engaged Lieutenant-Colonel Albrich's 'Panzer Regiment 5, plus some supporting Italian M13/40s, and held the German attack'.<sup>861</sup>

This encounter may have held the German advance but only temporarily. The event is described by A. J. Smithers in his book *Rude Mechanicals* 'as the difference between an experienced pack of hounds and the inmates of Battersea dogs home'.<sup>862</sup> The British tanks were out gunned and out numbered and quickly retreated in disorder and confusion. The British infantry, however, seem to have viewed this renewed attack with little concern. Major Puckle now commanding 'C' company reported that his men were quite happy and intended to stay where they were.<sup>863</sup> It seems that with the appearance

---

<sup>859</sup> War Diary 104 RHA WO 169/1431

<sup>860</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

<sup>861</sup> Forty, *Armies of Rommel*, p. 116.

<sup>862</sup> Smithers, p. 83.

<sup>863</sup> War Diary 104 RHA WO 169/1431

of the British tanks, ineffective though they were, and the resolute resistance of the Rifle Brigade infantry and their artillery support, the Germans decided to brake off their attack.

From just after 12:00 p.m. until about 2:00 p.m. both sides seem to have undertaken a regrouping exercise. However, 'at 2: 00 p.m. another German attack was launched, this time with the support of several waves of Stuka dive-bombers, but still the British held their ground'.<sup>864</sup> The Stuka attack was in support of yet another tank attack by Panzer Regiment 5. Corporal Gerhard Klaue of No 8 Company was ordered forward to take part in this attack. As he moved forward he looked out from the turret of his tank 'and spotted his first enemy, a camel which rushed like a wild thing towards the German armour. Was this some devilish stratagem of the "Tommy"? Presumably not. The beast sheered off and disappeared in a cloud of dust. The Panzers continued to advance but they could make no headway against the strongly held British positions'.<sup>865</sup> The German tank attack was held this time by the intervention of the anti-tank guns of 'J' Battery 3 RHA. Sergeant Finagin tells us that following the Stuka attack his fellow gunner, Freddie Ellis, and he; 'stopped the first three tanks and were credited with being the first people to destroy German tanks in North Africa'.<sup>866</sup>

At 15:05 p.m. Brigadier Latham ordered the guns of 104 RHA to shift the tanks of 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division which had halted in front of the Rifle Brigade's positions. The ensuing artillery barrage forced the German tanks to withdraw and encouraged Latham to again consider a counterattack. At 15:25 p.m. he instructed the guns of 104 RHA to be prepared to follow up the infantry as and when they advance. However, this counterattack was never allowed to develop. Information soon arrived which informed

---

<sup>864</sup> Delaney, p.15.

<sup>865</sup> Carell, p. 9.

<sup>866</sup> Dey, p. 10.



Latham that his defensive positions in the sand dunes were being attacked by both tanks and infantry.

‘Unfortunately for the British Rommel had not been inactive during the morning. Sensing that the frontal assault was getting nowhere, he had earlier personally reconnoitred an attack route through the sand dunes along the coast which formed the northern flank of the British position’.<sup>867</sup> The Germans now put in a concerted attack through the sand dunes to the north of the village with both ground troops and yet another dive bombing attack. The attack was made by Lieutenant-Colonel Ponath’s 8<sup>th</sup> Machinegun Battalion shortly after 16:00 p.m. His men moved through the sand-dunes to the north of the coastal road and then moved rapidly to out flank the British positions.<sup>868</sup>

Wolf Heckmann describes this assault thus; ‘the attack by well trained foot soldiers, who made skilful use of the cover provided by the sand dunes, made obsolete the old-fashioned British book of rules, which was based on the assumption of an orderly, tidy battlefield, with neatly separated lines, on which one had especially to beware of being outflanked, let alone encircled’.<sup>869</sup> This level of assault was becoming too heavy for the few hard pressed British infantry. They had already taken considerable casualties, and were, as Heckmann points out, in danger of being outflanked. A situation no British unit of the time would wish to find itself in. Consequently at about 16:30 p.m., Shipton, fearing that he was about to be outflanked or overrun, or both, ordered his rifle company’s to start withdrawing. As Heckmann observes; ‘today one can venture the opinion that this advance was one of the most fateful of the African campaign’.<sup>870</sup>

However, in a last ditch effort to rescue the situation Latham decided to ask Rimington for the rest of 5 RTRs tanks, and any other tanks available, to be sent

---

<sup>867</sup> Delaney, p.15.

<sup>868</sup> Kitchen, p. 75.

<sup>869</sup> Heckmann, pp. 72/73.

<sup>870</sup> *ibid*, p. 72.

forward to mount a counterattack. At about 17:30 p.m. Latham requested that '3AB should attack the German right flank. Gambier-Parry, however, responded that there would be insufficient time to get them into action from their present position before dark'.<sup>871</sup> Gambier-Parry did not want his armour fighting at night. This decision effectively ended the defence of Brega and as the evening darkness approached the battered remnants of 9RB, 5RTs, 1 KDG, 104 RHA, 'Y' Coy 1NF and 'J' Battery 3 RHA began to beat a hasty retreat. Sergeant Finagin, for instance, 'retired quickly in the evening as both of his guns were outflanked and amid transport of the Troop, 15-cwts, burning from the Stuka raid, he occupied an intermediate position between Brega and Agedabia'.<sup>872</sup> Hurst-Brown and his men were not so fortunate. In the darkness Brown and his men left their trench and made for the road. In the gloom they saw a soldier which they took to be British and approached the man. Unfortunately he turned out to be German and he and his colleagues quickly took Brown and his men prisoner. By the time the remnants of 9RB reached safety only three hundred and fifty of the original eight hundred answered the roll call as present.

The contribution of Rimington's 3AB to the defence had been, as might be expected, virtually none existent. A fact that Rimington himself seems to have realised. Brigadier John Combe the former commander of 11H who had arrived in the forward areas not long after Brega fell says that he found Rimington 'sitting in his staff car crying with his head in his hands. Gambier-Parry told Combe later that Rimington had lost his nerve at the end of the first war and that he had no faith in him and should have displaced him around Mersa Brega, but was sorry for him'.<sup>873</sup>

The defenders had fought all day virtually unaided, the only extra support they had gained was from the attack by the ramshackle tanks of 5 RTR. They had thwarted the

---

<sup>871</sup> Raugh, p. 190.

<sup>872</sup> Dey, p. 10.

<sup>873</sup> John Combe, letter from Combe to Hart found in Liddell-Hart Centre Doc number 4/3/18

attacks of an enemy at least six times their number. It truly was an heroic stand which so nearly held the German onslaught. However, ultimately the defence failed and the Germans were now through the Mersa el Brega defile. 'Although penetration was only achieved on a limited front, the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division's support group began to withdraw, and from that moment on the campaign was lost. In two weeks the Afrika Korps clawed back what Wavell had taken two months to achieve - except a besieged Tobruk'.<sup>874</sup>

With all the above being said, however, Brigadier Latham and his men, acquitted themselves with honour. Indeed even though his forces were so meagre and his resources inadequate he fought the battle with skill and tenacity. Also needing recognition for their determination and courage are Colonel Shipton's 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Rifle Brigade. They fought almost single handily for the whole day and so nearly held the German advance. One can only wonder how much more successful Latham and Shipton might have been had they had even a small reinforcement. Therefore the question must be asked, and will form the bases of the next section of the work, could even a modest reinforcement have been provided for the defenders of Brega?

## CHAPTER 4

*It is self-evident that it is the defender who primarily benefits from the terrain. His superior ability to produce surprise by virtue of the strength and direction of his own attack stems from the fact that the attack has to approach on road and paths on which it can easily be observed; the defenders position, on the other hand, is concealed and virtually invisible to his opponent until the decisive moment arrives. Carl von Clausewitz, On War.*<sup>875</sup>

What might have been: This section will review what the British could have done to repulse the German attack on 31 March. The chapter will commence with a review of

---

<sup>874</sup> Kershaw, p. 150.

<sup>875</sup> Clausewitz, p. 361.

the basic requirements needed to maintain a force in battle worthy condition. Reviews will be made of water, food, fuel, ammunition, dumps and transport. Having established the availability of material resources the chapter will move on to detail what forces could be made available to the defence. The chapter will then detail the availability of armoured cars, anti-aircraft guns, artillery, machine gun and infantry battalions. Once the status of these units has been established additional forces such as armour and aircraft will be reviewed.

## **THERE WAS NOTHING INEVITABLE ABOUT DEFEAT AT BREGA**

As can be seen from the evidence presented in the previous chapter the German breakthrough of the British defences at Brega was by no means an easy undertaking for the German and Italian forces involved. As it was it took Rommel all he could realistically throw at the defenders to force the British infantry and artillery from their positions. Indeed had 9RBs 'D' company and 'M' Battery of 3 RHA been moved forward, for example, as they undoubtedly could have been, then it is highly debatable whether the breakthrough would have occurred at all on 31 March?<sup>876</sup>

The above being said, therefore, this section of the work will seek to establish how many extra men, guns and tanks could have realistically been deployed to Brega if they could, in fact, be found. In an effort to quantify what deployments where possible the work will initially seek to establish the scope and availability of the six major elements required to form a creditable and sustainable defence at Brega, that is water, food, ammunition, fuel, transport, and of course, competent, fully equipped and suitably armed, combat units.

This section of the work will therefore commence with a review of the water requirements pertaining to any stand which might be made at Brega. In this regard an examination will be made of the general water situation in the Western Desert taking into account the measures which had already been taken to supply the original advance with water. This will be followed by a more focused review of the water resources

---

<sup>876</sup> See Dey, *Cairo to Berlin*, p. 9. See also Hastings, *The Rifle Brigade*, p. 62.

available in the region of Brega itself. Finally this section of the work will examine unit, and individual, water provision.

Having established the extent and availability of the water resources available the work will seek to establish what food resources were available and to what extent these could be made available to any troops which might be deployed to the Brega positions. The food review will consider various aspects of military rations including normal British military food stuffs, captured Italian rations and locally produced foods meat, fruit and vegetables etc.

In regard to ammunition and mines the work will review the availability of standard British ammunition, rifle rounds, high explosive shells and armour piercing shot. The use and availability of captured guns and ammunition will also be scrutinised. In regard to mines the extent, quality and availability of these vital munitions will be evaluated.

The availability and accessibility of fuel will be scrutinised from several perspectives. The overall fuel situation will be reviewed with attention being paid to the extent and organisational arrangements the British had in place at the time of the Brega defence. With regard to the amount and availability of fuel in the Brega area the work will seek to establish where stocks were situated and to what extent they were needed in the defence of Brega.

In regard to getting food stuffs to the troops in the Brega positions, and indeed in the supply of general war requirements (ammunition), (mines), (guns), (clothing), (spare parts) and the multifarious needs of combat troops, the various methods of getting such supply's forward will be explored. The main methods of ongoing supply, if required, will be reviewed including motorised haulage and sea bound cargos.

Once the availability of water, food, general combat requirements, and a satisfactory delivery system, have been established the work will move on to review what if any additional combat resources, infantry, armour, artillery and aircraft, could or could not

have been made available to defend the Brega position. Indeed this section of the work will seek to establish why authors such as John Strawson could come to the conclusion that ‘there was no grip, no mobile striking force worth the name, and nothing in reserve to improve the situation’.<sup>877</sup> Put simply this section of the work will seek to establish the veracity of Wavell’s claim that he could not adequately defend Brega because he had ‘nothing left in the bag’.<sup>878</sup>

## **WATER**

Perhaps the first thing to be said about the supply of water for men and machines fighting in the Western Desert is that their needs vary wildly throughout the year as temperatures rise and fall with the seasons.<sup>879</sup> ‘Troops operating in the Western Desert, for example, had to contend with extreme heat by day and near-freezing cold by night as a matter of course, as well as sand storms that reduced visibility to zero and the *Khamsin*, a hot wind blowing from the Sahara between February and June that routinely raised the temperature to in excess of 140 degrees Fahrenheit’.<sup>880</sup> Such extreme temperatures made even routine patrolling an arduous task and forced all combatants to adopt strict water discipline.<sup>881</sup>

In the summer months in North Africa, as might be expected, water consumption for both men and machines is always at its highest. However, in the winter months, particularly at night, temperatures in the desert drop remarkably low reducing water consumption drastically.<sup>882</sup> As the defence of Brega was in February and March, both normally cold months in the desert, it will be realised that water, although still very important to the British soldier for brewing up his tea, was not in as greater demand as it

---

<sup>877</sup> Strawson, *The Battle for North Africa*, p. 52.

<sup>878</sup> Connell, p. 386.

<sup>879</sup> Kershaw, p. 140.

<sup>880</sup> Buckingham, p. 58.

<sup>881</sup> Leakey & Forty, 1999, p. 15. Leakey gives a first hand account of how vital water discipline was to survival in the desert.

<sup>882</sup> Farran, p. 39.

would have been if the defence of Brega had taken place in summer. January and February, 1941, were, in fact, colder and wetter than previous average months, whereas March saw a marked improvement in the weather with hot days but still extremely cold nights.

Moreover, the level of water consumption in the desert is always dictated by the amount of movement a force is asked to undertake. Again, as might be expected, men and machines consume far more water when they are on the move. Physical exertion, even in cool weather, makes men thirsty. Travelling over even short distances in the desert often caused the vehicles of the time to overheat and consequently to lose water. On the other hand static or defensive positions, once prepared, require little physical effort to maintain them and consequently the men manning them require less water, especially if they can find cover out of the sun.

So what did this add up to in terms of water consumed per-man in North Africa? Harry Buckledee, a soldier with the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars in the desert in June 1940, recalled his experiences thus; ‘water was in very short supply in the early days, with strict rationing of four pints per man per day. Not very much when you consider the heat, and that vehicle radiators had to be topped up out of the ration. The order was given, no washing or shaving, so we all grew beards and were filthy. We learned to shave and have a wash in a pint of water’.<sup>883</sup> As the RASC historian confirms; men in the desert could survive on a water ration; ‘which often did not exceed three quarters of a gallon per-day for long periods and sometimes dropped to half a gallon’.<sup>884</sup> Indeed Roy Farran a tank commander with 3<sup>rd</sup> Hussars comments that the normal ration throughout Operation *Compass* was half a gallon per man each day.<sup>885</sup>

---

<sup>883</sup> Neillands, p. 43.

<sup>884</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 124.

<sup>885</sup> Farran, p. 62.

There are several points of relevance to this work which need to be noted from Buckledee's comments. Firstly it should be noted that Buckledee was in an active unit, that is to say a moving and fighting unit, in June, one of the hottest summer months, not March one of the coolest. As he says because he was in an active unit the trucks had to be kept moving, and if they needed water then they got it out of the men's ration if there was no alternative source of supply. Nonetheless, we may see that even in an active moving unit in one of the hottest months of the year men and machines could, for a limited time at least, function and fight on four pints of water per-day.

When this ration level is scaled up we may see that even in hot weather a moving unit of say one thousand men (a reinforced infantry battalion) could be kept in the field on 500 gallons of water per-day. That is less than the contents of one standard British Army water bowser.<sup>886</sup> The level of demand for water is obviously even lower when we look at the needs of men and machines in a defensive location such as the one found at Brega. As mentioned in winter water consumption per-man quite naturally goes down. When physical exertion is not needed and men can find shade consumption goes down even further. When vehicles are not being flogged over desert terrain, indeed used hardly at all, consumption also goes down. As has been established men in active units could move and fight on four pints of water per-day. But at Brega they did not have to.

Although water was short and re-supply difficult in the early months of the desert war as time went by the troops learned how to make the most of the water they had and exploit any water resources that came their way. Units and individual soldiers, quite quickly, learnt how to conserve water and to find ways to carry extra water with them. Evidence confirms that by the winter of 1940/41 most British soldiers had solved in great measure many of their personal water problems, quite independently of the War

---

<sup>886</sup> Bart Vanderveen, *Historic Vehicles Directory* (London: After the Battle Publications, 1989) p. 166. The standard British bulk water carrier in WWII was the Bedford OYC truck which could carry 800 Imperial Gallons of water. Also in use were Morris Commercial CS8 trucks which could carry 200 gallons of water. Bart Vanderveen, p. 157. See also A. H. Fernyhough RAOC, p. 119.



Department or HQ Cairo. Photographs of unit vehicles taken at the time clearly show tanks and trucks festooned with water bottles and auxiliary water containers.<sup>887</sup> Not only were vehicles carrying extra water so were many individual soldiers. Again it is not difficult to find examples of men with extra water bottles about their person.

However, although extra water was almost invariably carried by most soldiers in the desert, for British soldiers fighting in the Western Desert in early 1941, water soon became much less of a problem. As will be remembered the British advance in Operation *Compass* progressed rapidly for the first three days, however, after the first three days the advance was almost halted by the removal of 4 IID. This caused a lull in the fighting and a period of inaction for the forward British units which remained mostly in the open desert. These troops, some twenty thousand strong, now needed to be supplied with vast amounts of water or they would have to retreat back to where adequate water facilities existed, at least as far back as Mersa Matruh. Wavell could not allow this to happen, for reasons already stated; (Churchill's displeasure) consequently this set in motion a series of measures which ensured a secure and permanent water supply being established almost as far forward as Tobruk.

This, as explained earlier, entailed a large amount of work and utilised a vast amount of resources. Wells had to be drilled pipelines laid and pumps installed. However, when all this work was done a very good water supply system was established which virtually eliminated water shortages between Alexandria and Tobruk. After Tobruk was taken the water resources available became even greater as the water distillation plant found in the town and the wells near the port produced over 40,000 gallons of water per-day.<sup>888</sup> Furthermore, from Tobruk right forward to Brega there were a succession of village's, towns and even the city of Benghazi, all of which had good, even excellent, water

---

<sup>887</sup> Ian Baxter, *Images of War Afrika-Korps* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008) p. 75. Also Bryan Perrett, *Allied Tanks in North Africa: World War Two* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1986) Plate 20 and plate 32.

<sup>888</sup> John Foley, 'History of the Second World War' Volume 2 Issue 7 (London: Purnell, 1967) p. 621.

resources mostly supplied from the Jebel Akhdar hills. Derna, for example, known as ‘the pearl of Cyrenaica’, a town of 10,000 inhabitants, had an excellent water supply.<sup>889</sup> With these water resources available the whole road right up to El Agheila was, in fact, well furnished with water points.

Moreover, it will be remembered, that vast quantities of bottled water were discovered in the Italian dumps. Furthermore, thousands of Italian water containers, cans and bottles, and hundreds of water trucks were captured by the advancing British troops.<sup>890</sup> Nor, by March 1941, had very much of this booty been used or removed from the desert. At the conclusion of *Compass* the bulk of the British forces in the Western Desert were withdrawn either to go to Greece or to re-fit in the Delta. Consequently most of the bottled water, containers and water trucks were left, more or less, where they had originally been found. In the next theatre of operations for the British, Greece, there was little need for either water containers or water trucks.

In Greece there was abundant water just for the taking and in March/April 1941, because of the terrible winter weather, there was even more water than normal. Indeed when 3 RTR arrived in Greece the temperatures fell so low that they were given a snow warning. Moreover, the ground almost everywhere was waterlogged and the low ground was usually so wet that it became an impassable morass.<sup>891</sup> The 2,600 metre high Pindus Mountainous, the spine of Greece, fed numerous rivers and lakes<sup>892</sup> which because of the winter rains were overflowing. The River Venetikos, for example, which Bob Crisp, of 3 RTR, crossed in mid April 1941, was described by him as “torrential”.<sup>893</sup>

---

<sup>889</sup> Found in *Rommel's Desert War* by Kitchen, p. 77 and taken by him from Siegfried Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln* (Bonn: Athenaum, 1950)

<sup>890</sup> Bickers, p. 52.

<sup>891</sup> William Moore, *Panzer Bait* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991) p. 31.

<sup>892</sup> Bill Willett Editor, *Philips New World Atlas* (London: Guild Publishing, 1991) p. 39.

<sup>893</sup> Patrick Delaforce, *Taming the Panzers* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000) p. 53.

However, none of these external water resources was even remotely necessary at Brega. Although the water situation in the village of Brega itself was not good, because the Italians, before they left, had polluted the well, the surrounding wells were literally overflowing with good clean water. Roy Farran whose unit was patrolling the area around Brega in March 1941 had this to say about the water situation he found; ‘most of the wells in the foothills were full after the heavy rain and there was no shortage of water’.<sup>894</sup> This is further confirmed by Hurst-Brown who told the author that they had water trucks and that these delivered adequate water for the whole unit on a daily basis.<sup>895</sup> However, if there was any doubt about the amount of water in the Brega region it might be instructive to have Rommel’s views on the subject and the benefits he saw in occupying Brega: ‘A further argument in favour of an immediate move was that our water supply had recently been so bad that it was essential to open up new wells. An operation against Mersa el Brega would give us access to plentiful water-bearing land’.<sup>896</sup>

The land around the village of Brega could, and did, supply the water requirements for thousands of troops. It will be remembered that Rommel’s attacking force, comprising of approximately 50,000 men, was supplied from Brega after its capture.<sup>897</sup> Without bringing in a drop of water a reinforced brigade, of say four or five thousand men, could be watered with ease from the wells in and around Brega. As Playfair says the water at Mersa Brega was plentiful.<sup>898</sup>

## **FOOD**

Although most soldiers on active service frequently and almost habitually seem to complain about their rations, British soldiers being no exception, the rations available to

---

<sup>894</sup> Farran, p. 71.

<sup>895</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

<sup>896</sup> Hart, *Rommel Papers*, p. 107.

<sup>897</sup> Delaney, p. 14.

<sup>898</sup> Playfair, p.16.

British troops fighting in North Africa in 1941 were, perhaps surprisingly, more often than not, both plentiful and good. There were three primary sources of food available to troops fighting in the Western Desert. Firstly there were the food stuffs available in the standard British ration packs. Secondly there were food supplies which could be obtained locally along the line of march. Thirdly there were the huge stores of supplies captured from the enemy.

In regard to the provision of British rations these were available in two separate formulas. In base areas or areas where there was sufficient time to establish cooking and messing facilities for large cohorts of men, permanent or field kitchens were established. The food to cook in the base and field kitchens was obtained wherever possible from fresh sources. From early 1940 onwards the RASC set in motion a rolling programme of schemes which had the objective of sourcing as much fresh food as possible from local suppliers. 'Perhaps the most important of these schemes was the growing, in Egypt and Syria, of potatoes, without which the British soldier does not consider himself properly fed'.<sup>899</sup> Programmes were established to obtain, preserve and make available virtually every kind of food stuff the troops in the Middle East might require. Huge farms were established to grow all kinds of fruit and vegetables. Fish curing plants were established at Port Said as were jam and marmalade making facilities.

Fresh meat was provided from cattle ranches established in the Sudan.<sup>900</sup> Other fresh meat including lamb and chicken was obtained from farms in the Delta. In late 1940 Brigadier Galloway, a staff officer in Cairo wrote to O'Connor suggesting that he buy local sheep to feed his troops adding that he could also get 'dates from Siwa which were only 7 Piastres per 4 gallon tin'.<sup>901</sup> Obviously where there were cattle and

---

<sup>899</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 106.

<sup>900</sup> *ibid*, p. 106.

<sup>901</sup> Liddell Hart Centre, University of London Document Numbers 22/6/09 and 4/2/7

chickens there were eggs, milk and cheese and these commodities were supplied to troops in huge quantities. Flour, salt, and cooking oil were all easily available and consequently bakeries were soon established making fresh bread, biscuits and cakes daily.

In the field or on active operations obviously alternative arrangements had to be made. It was accepted that the supply of fresh food while on active operations would be difficult to supply although it has to be said that the RASC did all they could and with some success to make bread and hot food available in the most difficult of circumstances. When the 1KRRC were on active operations in July 1940, they were harassing the Italians around Sollum which was over 400 miles from Cairo; however, 'in spite of the great distance and all the consequent difficulties, rations were extremely good and never failed to arrive'.<sup>902</sup> Capitan Philip Gardener VC, a tank commander in the Western Desert in 1941, had this to say about operational rations he and his crew received while on a training exercise. 'Eventually we reached the sea where we made camp for the night. We were terribly dusty and sunburnt so we all had a swim before getting down to steak and chips. The next morning we were up early and all had a hot bath in a sulphur spring. This was followed by a fine egg-and-bacon breakfast'.<sup>903</sup>

However, even when the RASC could not provide fresh food, feeding troops far from base facilities proved to be relatively easy. Ration packs were issued containing 'bully beef and biscuits, with an occasional issue of tinned meat and vegetables. At one period all troops were issued with as much as eight ounces of jam and eight ounces of rice per day in order to produce a reasonably balanced diet'.<sup>904</sup>

The huge canning and food processing plants in Cairo and the Delta produced vast quantities of tinned and preserved food stuffs. Tinned beef, bully beef as it was

---

<sup>902</sup> Hereward Wake & W. F. Deedes, *Swift & Bold* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949) p. 38.

<sup>903</sup> Wood, p. 45.

<sup>904</sup> Verney, p. 22.

universally known, was available in almost inexhaustible quantities and almost without exception every soldier and vehicle in the Middle East would have stocks of it either in the cab or about their person. 'During the first campaign it was not unusual to have bully beef for all three meals each day – fried for breakfast, cold for lunch and stewed for supper. This last meal was always good as it was flavoured invariably with tomato puree which was captured from the Italians'.<sup>905</sup> Hard tack biscuits were also freely available and were often mixed with bully beef to make a satisfying stew or with condensed milk to make a kind of porridge.<sup>906</sup>

Other commodities found in the kitbags and vehicle cabs of most British soldiers were tinned jam, bacon, cheese, fish and of course tea, sugar and condensed milk to make a brew up. Nor was desert ignored. For desert there were tinned peaches or apricots from the U.S. or dates and figs obtained locally. There was, in fact, never a sustained period when troops in the Western Desert went without food. As the RASC historian proudly boasts; 'the field service ration scale, as issued in the Middle East, proved adequate throughout the war, and when fresh items could not be issued tinned equivalents were provided. In spite of tremendous losses at sea and on land there was never any real lack of food in the Middle East'.<sup>907</sup>

However, standard British rations were by no means the only form of food stuff available to men in the Western Desert. Another source of food supply which was extensively utilised by troops in the desert was the food stuffs obtained from local sources on the line of march. It must be understood that although there were very few humans in the desert interior along the coastal strip there were numerous settlements whose inhabitants farmed, fished and produced a variety of food stuffs. These commodities they were only too glad to either trade or sell to troops. The Jebel Akhdar

---

<sup>905</sup> Verney, p. 23.

<sup>906</sup> Farran, p. 38.

<sup>907</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 106.

region, Western Cyrenaica, was extensively cultivated. The Italian colonists of this region especially around the port of Benghazi had built roads, railways and the considerable farming population produced a large array of foodstuffs.<sup>908</sup>

Furthermore, there were indigenous nomadic Arabs who had flocks of both sheep and goats which again they were only too happy to trade. Pilots often reported seeing Arab tribes living in the most inhospitable terrain 'it was startling in the midst of this barren waste of sand to fly across tents, flocks of sheep and camels'.<sup>909</sup> Moreover, there was a surprisingly large supply of wild animals which could be eaten. 'Gazelle were plentiful, and casual, very casual, shoots provided some excellent fresh meat'.<sup>910</sup>

From these indigenous sources of food unit cooks could and often did source excellent food stuffs. Moreover, while this source of extra food was available to some degree all along the North African coast, in the Jebel Akhdar area, not much more than one hundred miles from Brega, there was the most abundant supply of food stuffs to be found just about anywhere along the North African coastline. The Italian settlers had harnessed the plentiful water resources available in the Jebel to create large scale farming communities and were producing all kinds of fruit and vegetables and raising livestock. Most of this produce was used to supply the needs of the major settlements in the region such as Barce, Derna and Benghazi. However, when the troops who would eventually man the Brega defences arrived in the region there were plenty of surplus food stuffs available throughout the Jebel region.

The other, and potentially the most plentiful and immediate source of food stuffs, was the food captured from the retreating Italian forces. As has been noted in previous chapters as each of the Italian camps and settlements was captured huge, perhaps vast would be a better word, amounts of food were found. As Don West tells us; 'the

---

<sup>908</sup> Connell, p. 410.

<sup>909</sup> Irving, p. 72.

<sup>910</sup> Wake & Deedes, p. 44.

extraordinary array of fine vintage wines and fine foods found in Sidi Barrani would not have disgraced the shelves and counters of those temples of excellence, Fortnum & Mason and Harrods Knightsbridge store.<sup>911</sup> In Tobruk the British captured enough tinned food to last the garrison of 27,000 men two months.<sup>912</sup> In the Italian motor convoy captured at Beda Fomm there were hundreds of tons more of food, including dried pasta, tinned meat, olive oil, tomatoes and tomato puree, to mention but a few of the commodities acquired. Moreover, and of great importance to the defenders in the later siege of Tobruk, there were extensive refrigeration facilities for preserving food stuffs found intact in Tobruk. As can be seen therefore there was generally no shortage of food available to British troops fighting in the Western Desert. More specifically to the men garrisoning the defences at Brega this general rule, of adequate food supplies, because of the closeness of the captured Beda Fomm convoy, was even more applicable.

However, perhaps the most immediate and easily accessible food was the troops own hard rations, bully beef, biscuits and all the other tinned and dried food stuffs issued to British troops. These supplies were available in great quantity both in the many dumps which had been established to support the O'Connor advance and in the vehicles and kitbags of the new troops coming into the desert.

Indeed most troops in the desert especially in the forward areas where there was the likelihood of surprise attack disliked central feeding stations. Therefore, alternative methods of messing had to be found 'the most popular, for both tactical reasons and with the troops themselves, was to cook on a 'vehicle' basis. This meant in, say, the case of a tank, the crew of three or four, but there was very great variety in the size of

---

<sup>911</sup> Don West, *Fox Killed in the Open* (Cambridge: Warrior Press, 1992) p. 45.

<sup>912</sup> Raugh, p. 115.



messes'.<sup>913</sup> It is perhaps interesting to note here that while British troops were well catered for in the field German troops had far less appetizing food to eat.<sup>914</sup>

Consequently even working on just crew rations alone it was quite possible to keep large numbers of troops in the forward areas for at least a week. However, any troops stationed at Brega had no need to fear going short of food and in indeed those that were in the garrison did not go short of rations. Indeed Hurst-Brown confirmed that in his whole time at Brega food was plentiful and of good quality.<sup>915</sup> Food was plentiful and easily accessible, as mentioned the men of 3H ran a bus into Benghazi each day to get fresh food. Moreover, there were stockpiles of food both British and captured available no more than a few hours drive away.

## **FUEL**

The evidence supporting the availability of adequate fuel supplies for any forces stationed at Brega is as easily satisfied as that of water. It might be said that as with water there was so much fuel available locally that none of the units sent to Brega even mentions it, and certainly never mentions being short of it.<sup>916</sup> There were several reasons for this abundance. Prior to the outbreak of the war the British had gained control of the huge production facilities in Iran and Iraq from which they could produce literally millions of gallons of fuel as and when they required it.

However, as will be recalled initially there had been significant problems with moving the fuel from the refineries and storing bulk fuel in strategically beneficial locations. These problems were in great measure solved with the establishment of the Jebel Dave scheme which by the time war came to the Middle East in mid 1940 allowed

---

<sup>913</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 106.

<sup>914</sup> Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 25. Schmidt one of Rommel's junior officers describes his evening meal a few days before the German breakthrough at Brega as hard tack washed down with lime juice.

<sup>915</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

<sup>916</sup> *ibid*

the British to transport and stockpile bulk fuel close to their military concentrations in the Egyptian Delta. From the bulk storage facilities in the Delta millions of gallons were driven and shipped forward to support the advances made in Operation *Compass*. This level of supply was made possible by the establishment of dedicated petrol units. The first of these units had arrived in the Middle East in August 1940 and from this point onwards new units arrived in an almost continuous stream. By August 1941 there were more than a dozen petrol depots, two base filling centres and two storage companies.<sup>917</sup>

When Operation *Compass* unexpectedly stopped in early February and the level of movement reduced the volumes of fuel consumed also reduced. The fuel tap, which up until this time had been turned full on, took some time to staunch. Indeed the tap was, in fact, never turned off fully and fuel continued to be brought to the forward areas far in excess of what, because of the suspension of combat missions, was now being consumed. Moreover, because of better handling and packing techniques of the 4-gallon flimsy cans more fuel containers were arriving in the convoys still full of fuel.

Consequently in the forward dumps and at the port facilities vast piles of fuel cans began to accumulate. In Tobruk, for example, prior to the German advance, large quantities of fuel had been stockpiled.<sup>918</sup> This abundance of fuel also applied to the stocks in the forward dumps. Indeed after the German breakthrough at Brega there are numerous reports from retreating units commenting on the many burnt out fuel depots and tankers they came across in the rear areas.<sup>919</sup>

Moreover, vast stocks of captured fuel, both diesel and petrol, were found in most of the towns and of course in the ten mile long Italian column taken at Beda Fomm. This fuel was for the same reasons as those mentioned above also now not being consumed. There were virtually no mobile troops left in the forward areas by late March to use all

---

<sup>917</sup> The Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, p. 109.

<sup>918</sup> Harrison, p. 28.

<sup>919</sup> Heckmann, p. 69.

this fuel anyway. The Sixth Australian Division began its return in mid February and the whole Australian Corps HQ was on the road to Egypt by 25 February.<sup>920</sup>

Indeed the main reason the mobile forces eventually sent to the forward areas, such as 3AB, were ultimately to become short of fuel after the Germans attacked was because it was destroyed to prevent it falling into enemy hands.<sup>921</sup> For example on 3 April a detachment of Free French troops stationed at Msus the main forward area fuel depot, mistaking a group of approaching British tanks and Long Range Desert Group troops to be German, set fire to millions of gallons of stockpiled fuel.<sup>922</sup> The burning of stored fuel at Msus was followed by similar incidents at most of the British fuel dumps the last of these being the huge dump at Mechili which Gambier-Parry himself ordered destroyed on 8 April.<sup>923</sup> Had the Germans been held at Brega the ensuing panic in the British rear areas would not have occurred and the fuel would consequently have been available to fuel vehicles re-supplying the forward troops.

The above being said it must be asked what level of demand for fuel could a static command established in a defensive location need. The answer must be very little which perhaps confirms why no mention, in the many accounts referenced, refers to a shortage of fuel by any of the units stationed at Brega. Indeed 1 KDG, who were operating armoured cars which could only manage about 5 miles to the gallon, had enough fuel to not only mount daily reconnaissance but also to establish their own fuel supply depot in rear of the Brega defensive position.<sup>924</sup>

As for the rest of the garrison using fuel it will be recalled that most of them did not even arrive at Brega until just a week before the Germans attacked, and made no significant movement apart from short range patrolling, until they withdrew on 31

---

<sup>920</sup> Active Service, p. 25.

<sup>921</sup> Smithers, p. 83.

<sup>922</sup> Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 263.

<sup>923</sup> Heckmann, p. 109.

<sup>924</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

March. It will also be noted that when the garrison did withdraw they had enough fuel to transport themselves the 400 miles back to Tobruk. Had a decision been made which would have enabled the garrison at Brega to be doubled or even tripled in the last week of March, or even earlier, there is nothing to suggest that these forces would have been prevented from deploying, or of being sustained, through lack of fuel.

## **AMMUNITION/MINES**

There was, as we shall see, enough ammunition to supply the needs of thousands of rifles, hundreds of artillery pieces and enough mines to sow a mine field eight miles wide and as deep as required should it be deemed necessary. Starting with artillery shells we may look to three primary sources of ammunition. As has been mentioned when the O'Connor advance came to a standstill in early February the supply echelons did not just suddenly come to a halt. Ammunition such as artillery shells had been ordered forward in huge quantities to support any advance that might be made on Tripoli. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that the ammunition brought forward was returned to the Delta.

These shells were unloaded in most of the ports that had been captured. In Tobruk, for example, a quarter of a million artillery shells had been stockpiled before the Germans attacked.<sup>925</sup> With the cancellation of the advance these shells were not used, consequently at the time of the German attack hundreds of thousands of artillery shells were available in the ports and forward dumps. This also applied to rifle and machine gun ammunition. Aside from the ammunition each soldier carried and the stocks held in reserve at unit level there were also millions of rounds stashed in the various dumps. There was no reported shortage of ammunition of any kind at Brega.<sup>926</sup> Indeed when

---

<sup>925</sup> Harrison, pp. 28/29

<sup>926</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

the Germans overran the Brega position and then captured the dumps they found plenty of petrol, vehicles and ammunition.<sup>927</sup>

Furthermore, there were thousands of rounds of captured Italian ammunition to supply the many useful Italian weapons taken. Although many of the Italian weapons were inferior to their British counterparts there were at least two types of Italian guns which all sides coveted, the 20 mm Breda Heavy Machine gun and the Italian anti-aircraft guns. Many units helped themselves to these weapons whenever they found them and the RAOC, as they occupied the Italian ammunition dumps, quickly established a system of ammunition distribution. They requested that units wanting refills of ammunition for these guns should simply produce an example.<sup>928</sup> The quantity of the Italian ammunition available to allied units may be gauged by the over 4,000 tons of Italian ammunition detonated by the British in Benghazi shortly after the Germans broke through at Brega.<sup>929</sup>

In regard to mines there were so many available that suggesting that there were none available for Brega flies in the face of reality. As mentioned earlier a huge minefield had been laid at El Agheila which could quite easily have been transferred to Brega. Moreover, by this time mines made in the UK were now being sent to Egypt. To these existing and newly arriving munitions there were also those made in Egypt to be added. The Royal Engineers produced over one hundred and fifty thousand very powerful mines prior to the German attack.<sup>930</sup> However, as before, the most plentiful supply of mines was the millions captured from the Italians. These were found around all their defensive locations and also captured unused in stores.<sup>931</sup>

---

<sup>927</sup> Neillands, p. 67.

<sup>928</sup> Fernyhough, p. 143.

<sup>929</sup> Irving, p. 70.

<sup>930</sup> Fernyhough, p. 119.

<sup>931</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p 165. Plate 3 Photograph of lifted Italian Mines.

However, although there was an abundance of mines available to the defenders of Brega they failed to fully mine the position. Indeed no evidence can be found that any of the senior commanders even considered ordering minefields to be laid. Had Wavell, Neame, Gambier-Parry or even Latham ordered Brega to be fully mined then evidence suggests that there were the mines available to adequately cover the whole position.

Therefore, as can be seen from the above there was no shortage of ammunition or mines in the Brega vicinity. Moreover, none of the units already at Brega when the Germans attacked or the units sent forward when it was too late to help mentions being short of ammunition.

## **DUMPS**

As for how all these stores might be made available to the men defending Brega we must look to the location of the dumps, storage facilities and unit allocations. As has been mentioned virtually all the towns and villages between Tobruk and Brega contained stores of various kinds useful to the defenders of Brega. At Mechili there were enormous stocks of food, fuel, clothing and even gin and whiskey.<sup>932</sup> In Tobruk there were vast stocks of food, water, fuel and ammunition. There were also huge stocks of food in Barce; and in Benghazi there was a similar amount of supplies and stores as those found in Tobruk. At Beda Fomm there was the enormous column of abandoned Italian lorries which were literally bursting with supplies of every kind. However, these sources of supply were by no means the only storehouses available to the men at Brega.

As the O'Connor advance moved past Tobruk the RAOC, as it had done earlier, established a series of Field Supply Depots. These were sited at 'Mechili and Msus on the inland route and Tecnis (north-east of Benghazi) and El Magrun (south of Benghazi) on the coast road'.<sup>933</sup> Once the advance came to an end it was realised that at some

---

<sup>932</sup> Heckmann, p. 111.

<sup>933</sup> Fernyhough, p. 143.

point it might be resumed and consequently stores continued to be stockpiled in dumps such as the one established at Mechili and in the ports of Tobruk and Benghazi. Indeed immediately after the Beda Fomm battle the Royal Navy were able to land 2,500 tons of petrol and 3,000 tons of other supplies at Benghazi. Moreover, they then guaranteed to land double the amount they were currently landing at Tobruk. The Navy's view on supply was that although it would not be easy they were confident that they could supply O'Connor's army of two divisions if they decided to advance on Tripoli.<sup>934</sup>

Indeed, as mentioned, supplies and petrol were continuously transported forward by the Navy and the road supply convoys and placed in the forward dumps right up to the time of the German attack. When 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian anti-tank gun Regiment arrived in the forward areas in early April 1941 they found that the dump at 'Mechili had been established for a force of ten thousand men with rations, petrol and water for thirty days'.<sup>935</sup> The Mechili dump also contained more luxurious items. When the Italians and Germans captured the Mechili dump in early April they were astounded by what they found. 'The Italians, not much pampered in life, were agog at the treasures: tins of apricots and ham and – for the lucky visitors to the store of the officers' mess – gin and whiskey. German Warrant Officer Claus Wernicke, covered in sweat arriving straight from the desert was the first German to dive into the clothing stores. Here there were stacks of the comfortable, ample, well ventilated shirts and underwear worn by the desert-wise British'.<sup>936</sup> This dump was established for the exclusive use of 2AD but other dumps were established and stocked for general issue.

## TRANSPORT

So would a lack of transport have curtailed any reinforcement of the Brega position. In regard to transport it has to be acknowledged that Neame had very little second, and

---

<sup>934</sup> Raugh, p. 123.

<sup>935</sup> John. N. L. (Silver) Argent, *Target Tank* (Parramatta: The Committee, 1957) p. 50.

<sup>936</sup> Heckmann, p. 111.

even less, third line, transport available for all the troops in his vast command.

Although it must also be acknowledged that all the units which ultimately went to the Brega area were fully mobile with their own first line transport.<sup>937</sup> Moreover, as we shall see shortly, other units which could have been deployed to Brega were not debarred from deployment through lack of first line transport.

In regard to second line transport Neame used the little he had to build up stocks of supplies in the three main forward dumps O'Connor had established, Barce, Benghazi and El Magrun<sup>938</sup> and the forward fuel supply depot at Msus. Neame also had the huge dump at Mechili. The Mechili dump had been established by the transport units which had supported the O'Connor advance and was thereafter topped up by Neame's second line transport.

The above being said, however, the question might fairly be asked how much second or even third line transport did a small static defensive garrison, surrounded by supply dumps and sitting on a huge water resource, actually need. The answer must be very little. As far as can be ascertained none of the units deployed to Brega complained about shortages of food, water, ammunition or fuel. Consequently it must also be assumed that they had adequate means of transport to supply their limited needs. Indeed it would be strange if they had not enough transport, as aside from their own first line transport they had available to them captured vehicles of every shape and size all along the Via Balbia right back to Tobruk. Although the Italian commanders had 'constantly complained about their lack of transport, the British were delighted to capture large numbers of Italian trucks and then put them to good use, yet there were still plenty left at the end of the campaign (total number captured at Beda Fomm was 1,500)'.<sup>939</sup>

---

<sup>937</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

<sup>938</sup> Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 251.

<sup>939</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 35.



It will be remembered that as with evidence provided by 11H, who incorporated many captured vehicles into their motor pool, many unit diaries confirm that most units stationed between Brega and Tobruk made liberal use of captured Italian transport for their own personnel use and for bringing supplies to their units. As Bickers says: 'Lorries, staff cars, personnel carriers and motorcycles stood ready for the taking. And they were taken. Officers and other ranks drove cars or rode motorcycles between their living quarters and the dispersed aircraft, offices and workshop tents'.<sup>940</sup>

However, it must be stressed, that Brega was a static command and therefore the troops stationed there were not consuming vast amounts of supplies which had to be brought forward in huge motor columns. Indeed the trucks which brought Hurst-Brown and his men to Brega hardly moved until they were captured by the Germans.<sup>941</sup> There were now not the 30,000 troops between Benghazi and Brega who needed supplying but by early March at the most 10,000 and of these most, the two Australian Brigades, approximately six thousand men, were stationed adjacent to Benghazi where there were almost unlimited supplies available just a few miles from their base.

Consequently the Brega position could easily support many more men than it did when the Germans attacked. The position was as we know held by two under strength brigades, the exact number of men holding Brega and the surrounding positions will probably never be precisely known, but using the known unit strengths and estimates of what manpower units would normally be composed of we can estimate that even on the highest estimates there could have been no more than fifteen hundred men in and around the village of Brega. Behind the forward troops there were perhaps a further two thousand five hundred giving a total of four thousand personnel. This is six thousand under what the Mechili dump alone could support for thirty days. It must therefore be made clear here that had Wavell ordered that say three thousand more men be moved to

---

<sup>940</sup> Bickers, p. 52.

<sup>941</sup> David Hurst-Brown, Interview 14 January 2011.

Brega there is no doubt that they could have sustained themselves from the various sources of supply already in the forward areas, definitely for many weeks and probably for many months.

### **BUILDING A FORCE TO DEFEND BREGA**

The Brega position would, however, be useless, even with an adequate supply of food, water, ammunition, mines, fuel, and the transport to supply it without competent troops and suitable weapons to adequately defend it. To make a fight of it, in view of the size of the enemy forces known to be assembling in front of it, and accepted by Wavell on 2 March as being at least one German armoured brigade group, two Italian infantry division, and two motor artillery regiments<sup>942</sup> plus substantial air forces<sup>943</sup> the commander of the Brega position would need a variety of military assets.

So what size and composition of forces might have given the British a fighting chance of holding Brega? In order to give the Brega position sufficient width and depth to repel a force of the size mentioned above a realistic defence force of at least one motorised infantry brigade (three battalions of infantry) would be required. This unit would need to be supported by a normal establishment of ancillary units comprising of field artillery, anti-tank guns, medium artillery and anti-aircraft guns. Tank support would also be useful, both in the static dug in role, and in the more normal mobile role to act as a strategic reserve to bolster any part of the defence that might come under extreme pressure. Reconnaissance in the form of armoured car regiments would also be vital both to warn of approaching danger and to operate in the marshes against the supply columns of the enemy. Air support would also be vital on as big a scale as

---

<sup>942</sup> Woollcombe, p. 81.

<sup>943</sup> The Italian/German air forces were in fact not as strong as the British thought. Figures taken from *British Intelligence in WWII* p. 385 reveal that throughout the Mediterranean the Germans had 120 long rang bombers, 150 dive bombers and 40 fighters, 310 combat aircraft, this information was received by GCHQ Cairo and Wavell at the end of January. However, in Libya the Germans only had about 50 dive bombers and 25 fighters to directly support operations in the desert. Taken from John Terrain *The Right of the Line*, p.335. That being said as Wavell was working on the late January figures he knew or thought he knew that he would also be facing a large German air force in Libya.

resources would allow. All this would need a commander, a brigade head quarters and a mobile strategic reserve force of ideally one additional mobile infantry brigade, but failing that, as large a reserve as could be mustered.

So where was Neame to get such a force? The answer to this question is that he already had most of these resources at his own command. Practically everything Neame needed to build the force described above was either already under his direct command or sitting idle in the Delta; all he had to do was assemble the various parts.

## **ARMoured CARS**

If we are to start anywhere in the construction of a credible force for the defence of Cyrenaica then, perhaps, the first thing we need to consider is the availability of a large reconnaissance force of armoured cars. Neame already had, as has been mentioned; an armoured car regiment in the Brega area, 1 KDG. The KDG were a newly converted armoured car regiment, only recently having been mounted on horses, and new to the desert.<sup>944</sup> However, although they were inexperienced they were potentially very good material and proved their worth when the fighting started.

The above being said the problem for Neame was that although 1 KDG were a good unit there were just too few of them. What Neame required if he was to carry out Wavell's instructions to try and impede his enemy's advance was another armoured car regiment. So the question must be asked was there another uncommitted armour car regiment available in the Middle East. To which the answer must be an unequivocal yes.

After the Italian surrender at Beda Fomm in early February the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars (11H), arguably the most desert worthy armoured car unit in the entire British order of battle, came to rest at El Agheila. The exact number of armoured cars that 11H had at the start of Operation *Compass*, on 9 December 1940, is difficult to give with precise accuracy.

---

<sup>944</sup> Buckingham, p.125.

George Forty gives a starting line up of 47 Rolls and 44 Morris<sup>945</sup> cars ten of which had been loaned, with crews; from the R.A.F.<sup>946</sup> This indicates that 91 cars were available. However, during the ten weeks of almost continuous action 11H lost some very experienced men and according to *The 11<sup>th</sup> at War* at least thirty-one armoured cars were damaged or completely destroyed.<sup>947</sup>

Nonetheless, although much under strength in early February 11H were still a coherent fighting force.<sup>948</sup> They still had operational armoured cars and indeed after Beda Fomm they sent patrols further forward well past El Agheila. *The 11<sup>th</sup> at War* tells us that they conducted maintenance on the remaining cars at El Agheila. This is also borne out by the references made in both texts to the joining up of the various squadrons of the Regiment after the battle at Beda Fomm. The Regiments support elements were obviously still intact as the Regiment was being supplied with food, water, spares and petrol. Their ability to continue in the field is, in fact, confirmed by their war diary.<sup>949</sup>

However, despite the fact that 11H were still capable of offensive operations the decision was taken, as with so many other units that February, to send them, not forward to Tripoli, but back to the Delta. After carrying out routine maintenance, 11H was soon ready to make the nearly one thousand mile journey back to Cairo.<sup>950</sup> The Hussars arrived back in Cairo on 22 February 1941 the 920 mile journey had taken them six and a half days. Moreover, the journey had been completed with virtually no breakdowns.<sup>951</sup>

---

<sup>945</sup> Forty, *Victory Desert Triumph*, p. 60.

<sup>946</sup> *ibid*, p.126.

<sup>947</sup> Dudley Clarke, *The Eleventh at War 1934 – 1945* (London: Michael Joseph, 1952) pages 130/135/137/138/139/142/143/146/151/154/155.

<sup>948</sup> *ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>949</sup> War Diary 11H WO 169/1390

<sup>950</sup> *ibid*

<sup>951</sup> *ibid*

After a two day rest, on 24 February, the war diary tells us that the Regiment started a program of training and men were sent on courses in gunnery, driving, maintenance and many other tasks. Training as the war diary says progressed very favourably and the strength of the regiment grew in both physical strength and in competence.<sup>952</sup> The Regiments manpower also increased when, on 10 March, 8 officers and 129 other ranks joined the Regiment. This brought the Regiment in manpower up to full war establishment. Moreover, these new soldiers in no way became a burden to the Regiment, as new recruits might have been expected to do, as they were mostly ex 11H reservists and most had served with the Regiment in Egypt previously.

So what contribution to the defence of Brega might 11H have been able to make? Even assuming that all the 31 cars damaged in the previous ten weeks fighting were completely lost; that still left around 40 cars available for service. Moreover, the ten RAF cars which after Beda Fomm were returned to RAF control could have been returned to 11H.<sup>953</sup> If these RAF cars are taken into consideration it is not unrealistic to speculate that 11H could have mustered somewhere in the region of 50 armoured cars complete with a full compliment of ancillary equipment and transport in mid March.

The actual use of this valuable unit is sadly mirrored by many other units that March. On 31 March 11H, who throughout the month, as mentioned, had been leisurely reorganising themselves in Cairo, were suddenly ordered to take over the guard duties of 1KRRC. This battalion was now being sent to the Western Desert. However, the Regiments new guard duties did not last long. With the news that the front was now crumbling completely 11H was also ordered to follow 1KRRC into the desert. As their old cars had by this time been sent to the workshops they were issued with some new Marmon Harrington armoured cars taken from the 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoon Guards. Their strength in armoured cars was at this stage 30 in total. This allowed 'A' Squadron with 12 cars 'C'

---

<sup>952</sup> War Diary 11H WO 169/1390

<sup>953</sup> Fletcher, p. 75.

squadron with 12 cars Squadron HQ with 2 cars and Regimental HQ with 4 cars to move out of Cairo on 4 April.<sup>954</sup>

Consequently when it was too late to make any worthwhile contribution to the defence at Brega this valuable and desperately needed unit was ordered into the desert. There is absolutely no doubt that had 11H been ordered forward in mid March they could have done so. We will of course never know what effect the appearance of this vastly experienced unit would have had on the fighting at Brega but there is no question that had they been ordered forward in mid March they could have been in the line long before the Germans attacked on 31 March.

### **ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS**

Throughout the Second World War the battle, perhaps contest might be a better description, between the warplane and its pray on the ground or at sea, was a relentless, and often, merciless struggle. Rommel was to say of air warfare: 'The battle on the ground will be preceded by battle in the air. This will determine which of the contestants has to suffer operational and tactical disadvantages and be forced throughout the battle into adopting compromise solutions'.<sup>955</sup> In the Western Desert this contest was as bitterly fought, and because of the open nature of the terrain in the desert perhaps more merciless fought, as in any other theatre of the war. The fighters, bombers, and in the Germans case, dive-bombers, of all the belligerents involved, attacked whatever they could wherever they could find it. Conversely those they attacked fought back, as best they could, with anti-aircraft guns of just about every type and calibre that they could find in their respective arsenals.

All those involved in this vicious struggle realised that to allow their enemy to gain mastery of the air above their forces would place them in extreme danger. General

---

<sup>954</sup> War Diary 11H WO 169/1390

<sup>955</sup> <http://www.memorablequotations.com/rommel.htm>

Montgomery commented thus: 'If we lose the war in the air, we lose the war and lose it quickly.'<sup>956</sup> Mastery of the air, therefore, gave the side that achieved it a significant and often decisive military advantage. Consequently all sides strove wherever and whenever possible to equip their land and naval forces with as many of the best and most effective anti-aircraft guns that their respective armaments industries could procure, with the aim of avoiding this potentially disastrous situation.

To furnish their ground forces with air defence the British Army in WWII deployed two types of mobile anti-aircraft gun units, one light and one heavy. The light regiments were usually armed with 36-40mm Bofors anti-aircraft guns distributed between three batteries with 12 guns in each battery. Each battery was then sub divided into three troops with 4 guns in each troop. The heavy anti-aircraft regiments were armed with 36 heavy 3.7" guns<sup>957</sup> and 12-40mm Bofors guns 48 guns in total. The guns in this type of unit were distributed between four batteries, three batteries were equipped with heavy weapons and one battery was equipped with light guns. The batteries of heavy anti-aircraft regiments were each sub divided as the light units. The fourth battery of the heavy anti-aircraft regiments was in effect identical to a light anti-aircraft battery in both manpower and weapons.<sup>958</sup>

The Bofors gun, the standard equipment of light anti-aircraft batteries throughout the war, was an exceptional weapon by any standard. The Bofors fired a 40 millimetre, 21lb high explosive shell which was 'fused to explode on impact, but to allow for mis-hitting a target, it could be set to self-destruct at either 11 or 17 seconds'.<sup>959</sup> The rate at which the gun could hurl these 21lb shells into the air was prodigious. 'The possible automatic rate of fire was 120 to 135 rounds per minute, but single-shot firing at 1 round per

---

<sup>956</sup> <http://www.afa.org/quotes/quotes>.

<sup>957</sup> Bishop, p. 155.

<sup>958</sup> Davis, p. 41.

<sup>959</sup> Manx Aviation Preservation Society: <http://www.maps.iofm.net/bofors-guns.htm>

second was normally used to facilitate observation of tracers. The maximum effective ceiling of the gun is 7,500 feet'.<sup>960</sup>

LAA regiments batteries and the light batteries of heavy anti-aircraft regiments were theoretically supplied with the same ratios of troops, weapons, vehicles and equipment. A battery would typically be composed of approximately 240 officers and men. In addition to its Bofors Guns a battery would normally have a small collection of light and heavy machine guns, approximately 100 .303 rifles and in the early part of the war 4 Boys Anti-tank guns.

To transport all the guns and troops of the battery a typical establishment of about forty motor vehicles was required. The following is a report listing the vehicles actually being used by a LAA in the desert in August 1941. The report tells us that the unit had '12 Field gun tractors, 1 Utility, 3 8-cwt, 6 15-cwt 19 3-ton and 8 motorcycles'.<sup>961</sup> The Field gun tractors, Morris Commercial CDSW, were the most important of these vehicles as they had been specifically designed to tow the guns and suitable replacements could not easily be found.<sup>962</sup> The other vehicles in the units inventory could and often were substituted by whatever transport came to hand.

The main function of light anti-aircraft gun units was to give local air defence to mobile forces. Consequently they 'were usually to be found at Battalion level, watching over the concentrations of supplies and transport, guaranteed to take the eye of any roving fighter pilot'.<sup>963</sup> It was against low flying fighters and dive-bombers that these weapons were most useful. The Bofors gun was 'no threat to the highflying bombers

---

<sup>960</sup> Davis, p. 158.

<sup>961</sup> Ronnie Gamble, *The Coleraine Battery, The History of 6 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery RA (SA) 1939-1945* (Coleraine: Causeway Museum Service, 2006) p. 53.

<sup>962</sup> See Bart Vanderveen, *Historic Military Vehicles Directory*, p. 162.

<sup>963</sup> [http://www.bayonetstrength.150m.com/Weapons/lightantiaircraft/light\\_anti\\_aircraft\\_weapons.htm](http://www.bayonetstrength.150m.com/Weapons/lightantiaircraft/light_anti_aircraft_weapons.htm) - 15k



but low flying, relatively lightly armoured fighters, so small that any hit would cause some appreciable damage, were vulnerable'.<sup>964</sup>

## **15 LAA**

The 15<sup>th</sup> (Isle of Man) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery (15 LAA) was a typical example of the light anti-aircraft regiment and is one of two light anti-aircraft gun units (the other being 6 LAA) whose progress this part of the work will follow. 15 LAA was raised in the Isle of Man (I.O.M.) and two Batteries became operational with a normal issue of Bofors guns in the summer of 1938. After many months of training the Regiment sailed, on 24 August 1939, to Liverpool where they took up duty guarding the ships on the river Mersey. While stationed at Liverpool a third battery, the 129<sup>th</sup>, which had also been raised in the I.O.M., joined the established units of 15 LAA and completed the Regiment.

Throughout August and September 1939, 15 LAA operated as a complete unit; however, in October the Regiment's batteries were deployed separately for the first, but by no means the last, time. The three, 12 gun batteries of the Regiment, became virtually separate independent units. This type of deployment should be noted as it became common practise as the war went on, with single batteries, sometimes-single troops, of light anti-aircraft guns being sent wherever their services were most needed. The personnel of units like 15 LAA became accustomed to operating independently, and as the war progressed their equipment and vehicles became almost permanently organised for self-sufficient individual deployment.<sup>965</sup>

In November 1940, the sub units of 15 LAA were, however, reassembled and on 19 November the complete Regiment set sail for the Middle East. The three Batteries of 15

---

<sup>964</sup> [http://www.bayonetstrength.150m.com/Weapons/lightantiaircraft/light\\_anti\\_aircraft\\_weapons.htm](http://www.bayonetstrength.150m.com/Weapons/lightantiaircraft/light_anti_aircraft_weapons.htm) - 15k

<sup>965</sup> All the above details of 15 LAA have been taken from Manx Aviation Preservation Society web site: <http://www.maps.iofm.net/bofors-guns.htm>.

LAA were when they arrived in Egypt, quickly assigned to various tasks. 41 Battery was sent to East Africa 129 Battery sailed to defend Crete. However, R.H.Q and 42 Battery remained in Egypt where their 12 Bofors guns were sent to help defend the Suez Canal.<sup>966</sup>

## **6 LAA**

6 LAA were raised in Northern Ireland at the beginning of 1939. They were to form the light Battery of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Londonderry) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment; Royal Artillery (Supplementary Reserve) and became known as the 6<sup>th</sup> (Coleraine) Light Anti-Aircraft Battery. Once assembled, like the men of 15 LAA, the men of 6 LAA now commenced a rigorous regime of training in the use of their weapons. By September 1940 they were as proficient as any anti-aircraft gun unit in the British Army.

On the night of 8/9 September 1940 the men and guns of Major James Hope's 6 LAA Battery set sail from Liverpool in the 28,000 ton liner QSMV *Dominion Monarch*, bound for Egypt. The men of 6 LAA arrived at Port Tewfiq, Egypt, on 22 October 1940. The following day the Battery moved from Port Tewfiq to Beni Suef, a tented camp near Cairo. There, the Battery was fully equipped for desert fighting, trained in desert lore and made ready to play its part in the anti-aircraft defence of the Suez Canal.

## **DEPLOYMENT**

The deployment of 42 Battery, 15 LAA, and 6 LAA Battery, of 9 HAA (12 Bofors in each Battery 24 guns in total) to the Suez Canal was, however, to turn out to be a rather wasteful and problematical use of these valuable and scarce guns. The problem in deploying Bofors Guns to defend the Suez Canal against air attack was that the guns could only reach targets flying at or below their maximum ceiling of 7,500 feet.

Unfortunately for the British the enemy were dropping their mines and bombs onto the

---

<sup>966</sup> All the above details of 15 LAA have been taken from Manx Aviation Preservation Society web site: <http://www.maps.iofm.net/bofors-guns.htm>

Canal from aircraft flying well above this height and at night. Consequently the guns were completely useless deployed as they were to defend the Canal from this threat. However, even though the guns of 6 LAA and 42 Battery could not hit their adversaries they were employed in this static role for many months.<sup>967</sup> While the men and guns of 6 LAA and 42 Battery were uselessly guarding the Suez Canal their service were desperately needed in the Western Desert.<sup>968</sup>

As was to be the case with many units which would have been invaluable to the defenders of Brega, when it was too late to be of any help to the defence 42 Battery and 6 LAA were sent to where they could and should have been sent months earlier. After nearly six wasted months 42 Battery and 41 Battery which had just return from East Africa were belatedly reunited and moved with their RHQ into the Western Desert as were 6 LAA.

There was no reason why when Wavell wrote his initial shopping list of units needed in the Western Desert in early March, or even when he returned to Cairo on 18 March, after his visit to Neame, that he could not have ordered that the guns of 42 Battery, and, 6 LAA, be moved forward to Brega. They were serving no useful purpose where they were and would be sent later anyway.

Had they left in early, or even mid, March, they would have been available in plenty of time to defend the troops garrisoning Brega from the terrifying Stuka attacks that they were subjected to and which contributed in no small measure to the withdrawal. We may conclude that from early March onwards there were at least 24 Bofors anti-aircraft guns available in the bag.

---

<sup>967</sup> All the above details of 15 LAA have been taken from Manx Aviation Preservation Society web site: <http://www.maps.iofm.net/bofors-guns.htm>

<sup>968</sup> Jon Latimer, *Tobruk: Rommel's Opening Move* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001) p. 21.

## ARTILLERY

At the outbreak of WWII the British Army had no modern medium artillery pieces readily available to issue to either existing or new units being formed. The medium artillery regiments already raised were therefore equipped with a mix of WWI vintage weapons such as the 60 pdr. gun and the 6-in. howitzer. The 60 pdr. gun, unfortunately, although of sound design was far from an ideal weapon. 'The 60-pounder (5in/127mm calibre) gun which had first appeared in 1904 was a cumbersome weapon by modern standards; it was considered obsolescent by 1939'.<sup>969</sup> The fact that the 60 pdr. was a cumbersome weapon was unfortunately not its only fault; it was fitted with wooden wheels with iron tyres, which made mobility difficult, especially in the desert. The wooden spokes often broke on the hard desert terrain and the iron tyres came off the wheels.

The 6-in. howitzer, on the other hand, was a far more useful weapon and consequently had a much longer life in front line service. The 6-in. 26-cwt howitzer, as the version which saw service in WWII was known, to differentiate it from earlier 6-in. howitzers, first appeared in 1915. This weapon rapidly became one of the most useful guns in the army, with over 3000 being made before 1919'.<sup>970</sup> After the armistice the 6-in. howitzer became the backbone of the medium artillery component of the British Army throughout the inter-war years. The 6-in. howitzer proved to be a very versatile and adaptable gun and was updated on several occasions in the inter-war years. The Mk 1P 6-in. howitzer, as the final version was designated, was used throughout the early desert campaigns.<sup>971</sup>

The Mk 1P was for its time an advanced design. The carriage incorporated a hydropneumatic recoil system which kept the wheels and trail perfectly still when the

---

<sup>969</sup> Ian V. Hogg, *Allied Artillery of World War Two* (Marlborough: The Crown Press, 1998) p. 34.

<sup>970</sup> Ian V. Hogg, *British & American Artillery of WWII* (London: Greenhill Books, 2002) p. 34

<sup>971</sup> *ibid*, p. 50.

gun was fired. Thus the gun did not have to be re-aimed and could deliver round after round on to its target quickly and with accuracy.<sup>972</sup> The gun was also fitted with a modern axle with steel wheels and pneumatic tyres.<sup>973</sup> The Mk 1P was by any standards a remarkable weapon. This extremely reliable howitzer could throw a 100lb high explosive (HE) shell 9,500 yards or an 86lb HE shell 11,400 yards.<sup>974</sup> Even with the heavier shell the gun could deliver 100lbs of HE, with accuracy, onto a target over 5 miles away. The crew could fire, in short bursts, 2 rounds per minute and could easily manage 1 round per minute in sustained fire.

Although a heavy gun, the weight of the gun and breach mechanism was 2,856lbs, and the overall length of the weapon was 87.55in., with its modern carriage, hydropneumatic recoil system and pneumatic tyres the gun was relatively easy to tow and could be quickly brought into action giving rapid, heavy and accurate fire support. (An ability always appreciated by the PBI). As Shelford Bidwell states in *Gunners at War*; 'it is sometimes forgotten that a medium battery has the firepower of a naval cruiser'.<sup>975</sup>

To transport the guns into action medium artillery regiments in 1940/41 used primarily two types of prime mover. These were, the six-wheeled Scammell Pioneer R-100 and the four wheeled AEC Matador O853. Production of the nearly 10,000 AEC Matadors built started in 1938, the early model, the 853, had a petrol engine, this was later replaced by a diesel engine and these vehicles were re-designated Matador O853, evidence suggests that the vehicles used by medium artillery regiments in the desert in 1940/41 had diesel engines and were therefore of the later type. 'The Matador had a 40-gallon fuel tank, which gave it a range of 360 miles. The fuel consumption was approximately 9 miles per gallon and the vehicle had a maximum speed of 36 miles per

---

<sup>972</sup> Hogg, *British & American Artillery of WWII*, p. 50.

<sup>973</sup> Hogg, *Allied Artillery of World War Two*, p. 34.

<sup>974</sup> Davis, p. 155.

<sup>975</sup> Bidwell, p. 168.

hour'.<sup>976</sup> The Matador's 'body could accommodate a nine man gun crew, as well as ammunition and gun equipment'.<sup>977</sup>

The first of the 768 Scammell Pioneers built entered service in the mid 1930s and was so good that it remained virtually unchanged throughout its service life.<sup>978</sup> The Scammell Pioneer R-100 6 x 4 heavy artillery tractor was an excellent vehicle. It had a 'steel-panelled body with accommodation for a crew of 9, ammunition and equipment'.<sup>979</sup> The Pioneer, like the Matador, was powered by a diesel engine and was fitted with a useful 'overhead 10 cwt block and tackle to load and unload ammunition and, on occasions, to lift the gun trails on to the towing hook'.<sup>980</sup>

Medium artillery was normally employed on counter battery work and on other missions where use could be made of its long rang.<sup>981</sup> The 6-in howitzer was 'used with great effectiveness in the counter-battery role in North Africa (where the Germans had few comparable weapons)'.<sup>982</sup> Despite the much heavier guns used in a medium artillery regiment medium regiments were organised for manoeuvre and deployed in the same way as the field regiment.<sup>983</sup>

The effects of artillery bombardment were greatly increased after the First World War by improvements in concentrations of fire. In the inter war years the U.S. Field Artillery School, developed a means of concentrating any amount of artillery on a target of opportunity.<sup>984</sup> The invention of reliable portable radios, in addition to field telephones, enabled commanders of artillery to co-ordinate the fire of their guns much more precisely than had been the case in WWI. 'Procedures were developed enabling

---

<sup>976</sup> Bishop, p. 97.

<sup>977</sup> Church, p. 90.

<sup>978</sup> *ibid*, p. 91.

<sup>979</sup> Vanderveen, p. 190.

<sup>980</sup> Church, p. 91.

<sup>981</sup> Davis, p.32.

<sup>982</sup> Johnson, p. 83.

<sup>983</sup> Davis, p. 32.

<sup>984</sup> Bellamy, p. 83.

adjustments to be made and recorded as if seen from the forward observer's position, instead of the battery position'.<sup>985</sup>

In WWI the use of indirect artillery fire had enabled commanders to bring down enormous amounts of fire onto a target. Although devastating when it hit the target this was a very cumbersome and inflexible way of directing artillery fire. To improve the situation the Americans formulated a system using graphical firing tables which compensated for the different firing positions of the guns. This enabled a common reference point to be established in each divisional area. This new way of directing fire gave a single forward observer the ability to bring down as much or as little firepower down on a target as he wished. The new system proved to be very successful and is essentially the system still used today.<sup>986</sup>

A medium artillery regiment in 1940/41 had a notional establishment of approximately 700 officers and men, the regimental HQ officially comprised 204 officers and men and each battery approximately 240, although in the desert this figure could, and often did, vary wildly, usually in a downward direction. Medium artillery regiments in WWII were composed of sixteen guns split into two eight gun Batteries. Each Battery was sub divided into two Troops of four guns. The ammunition carried 'on each gun tractor (*prime mover*) was fifty rounds all HE no smoke being fired by medium artillery'.<sup>987</sup> Aside from the ammunition carried on the prime movers each Battery was supported by a Battery Ammunition Group (BAG) which carried a further 400 rounds of ammunition usually in 3-ton lorries. This gave each gun in the Battery an organic 100 rounds of ammunition. A medium artillery regiment was a potent, versatile and highly prized military asset and in March 1941 Wavell had, arguably, the most experienced medium artillery regiment in the Western Desert at his disposal.

---

<sup>985</sup> Bellamy, p, p. 83.

<sup>986</sup> *ibid*

<sup>987</sup> Davis, p.32.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment Royal Artillery (7 RHA) arrived in the Middle East from India in 1939.<sup>988</sup> When Operation *Compass* started in December 1940 the Regiment was quickly brought into the fighting. The 7<sup>th</sup>'s guns were found to be extremely useful in a variety of roles. 'Medium artillery combines the mobility of field guns with the heavier punch of a larger calibre. With its long range it can support armoured forces from a distance, all without the need to move'.<sup>989</sup> However, it is in the counter battery role where these guns excel, their 'essential task is to fight a duel with the opposing artillery'.<sup>990</sup>

In the Western Desert in Operation *Compass* their services were constantly in demand by the attacking infantry units attempting to take the Italian's pre prepared defensive positions such as Fort Capuzzo and fortified towns like Bardia and Tobruk. At Capuzzo, for example, an Italian strong point was holding up the Australians advance. To clear the obstacle the four 60 pdrs of 'A' Troop of 25/26 Battery were called upon to give the infantry their support. The strong point was soon obliterated 'an Australian eyewitness afterwards described how the small enemy battery which had been holding up the infantry was utterly demolished following an air shoot by the Troop'.<sup>991</sup>

Towards the end of January 7 RHA was assembled, as a complete unit, at Tobruk where it made itself ready to continue the pursuit of the retreating Italians. On 27 January the Regiment moved out of Tobruk heading for the coastal town of Derna. Later, on the same day, 'all guns went into action on the heights overlooking Derna but it was soon learned that the town had been evacuated'.<sup>992</sup> This was to be the last fighting the Regiment was to do in this period of the war. In early February most of the

---

<sup>988</sup> F. H Johns, J.A.C Monk. & P.J.D. Langrishe, *The History of the 7<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment Royal Artillery 1939 – 1945* (Sheffield: Historical Committee, 1951) p. 1.

<sup>989</sup> Bidwell, p. 99.

<sup>990</sup> *ibid*

<sup>991</sup> Johns, Monk. & Langrishe, p.12.

<sup>992</sup> *ibid*, p.15.



Regiment moved into Benghazi where they were billeted in buildings belonging to the Benghazi Zoo.

The 27/28 Battery with their 6-inch howitzers remained near Tecnis, occupying an old Turkish castle. 'Since the Regiment was not required for operations in the forward areas, there was an opportunity to get really clean for the first time in many weeks'.<sup>993</sup> The Regiment stayed in the forward areas until mid February. On 15 February they began their long trek of approximately 800 miles back to Cairo. They arrived back at Almaza Camp on 25 February. They now commenced a thorough overhaul of their equipment and new equipment was issued as necessary.<sup>994</sup>

By late February 1941, 7 MAR was again a complete and fully equipped unit. There were, it is true, areas where the units equipment needed improvement, however, these deficiencies were not in anyway so great as to prohibit any part of 7 MAR from continuing the fight. This was proved to be the case when on 26 March 'orders were received instructing R.H.Q. and 25/26 Battery to move out to Amiriya en route for an unknown destination'.<sup>995</sup> They were going to Greece from where a great many of them never returned. However, the 27/28 Battery, with its eight 6-in howitzers and their prime movers, which would have been of immense value to Neame and his defenders at Brega, were left, unused, at Almaza.

Why these guns were removed from the forward areas in late February when by then it was becoming more likely by the day that their services would be required, is hard to understand. It seems incredible that when Wavell said in early March that he would have to reinforce Neame because, in his words, "he had thinned the defence down to a dangerous level", these guns were not immediately redeployed to the Western Desert.

---

<sup>993</sup> Johns, Monk. & Langrishe, p.16.

<sup>994</sup> *ibid*

<sup>995</sup> *ibid*, p.17.

We may be confident that had 27/28 Battery of 7 MAR been ordered forward in March they could have deployed to Brega long before the Germans attacked.

## **ANTI-TANK GUNS**

As has been mentioned Neame only had one anti-tank gun unit, 'J' Battery of 3 RHA with twelve assorted anti-tank guns.<sup>996</sup> This was a pitifully small allocation of anti-tank guns for a defence which was known to be confronted by a German armoured brigade group. The composition of German formations was quite well known by 1941 and there is no doubt that Wavell would have known that an armoured brigade would have at least 160 tanks. So, it might reasonably be asked, where were the other two Batteries of this desperately needed anti-tank gun regiment?

When 3 RHA returned to the Delta the unit handed in most of its transport and reverted from a four Battery regiment to the more normal three Battery establishment. This meant that although the Regiment now had virtually no transport it was in all other respects over equipped with four Batteries of guns and the manpower to match. It might have been thought that as 3 RHA was the only, at least partly, operational anti-tank gun regiment in the whole of the Middle East that strenuous and urgent efforts would have been made to make this valuable and scarce asset fully fit for battle as soon as possible.

However, virtually no effort was made to make 3 RHA battle worthy. Indeed Dey in his history of the Regiment confirms that 'the majority of the men now had a well earned rest'.<sup>997</sup> Instead of being re-equipped with new or reconditioned vehicles, disposing of their surplus personnel and selecting and reconditioning the best of their guns the men of 3 RHA were either given leave or given the role of mentors to various forming anti-tank gun regiments. This combination of assignments had, without doubt, a debilitating effect on 3 RHA. However, it should not be thought that this very

---

<sup>996</sup> Dey, p. 9.

<sup>997</sup> *ibid*

experienced unit could not rapidly have been brought back to fighting ability should need arise.

Throughout late February and early March 3 RHA were at Beni Yussef camp.<sup>998</sup> They had, as mentioned, at this time very few vehicles most having been handed into 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Divisions Vehicle Pool this left only twenty one with the Regiment.<sup>999</sup> They did, however, retain most of their guns. This situation changed when in late February at least 12 of their Bofors anti-tank guns and their 15 cwt Portees were transferred over to 2/3 Australian anti-tank gun Regiment.<sup>1000</sup> Of the remainder of their guns it seems that at some time in early March most were handed into the ordnance depot.

Therefore when the order came, on 21 March, to send a unit forward, only 'J' Battery, with 9 2 pdrs and 3 Bofors, complete with their towing vehicles and Portees, were readily available. Nonetheless, when the order came to send the rest of the Regiment forward on 26 March 'M' Battery was quickly re-equipped and left on 30 March. They drew 15 cwt and 30 cwt lorries from the vehicle supply depot at Mena and collected 12 Bofors anti-tank guns and 13 reconditioned Portees from the ordnance depot at Amirya.<sup>1001</sup> They arrived in the forward areas around Mechili on 4 April where they joined the Australian retreat into Tobruk.

The remainder of the Regiment, RHQ and 'D' Battery, left Beni Yussef for Brega on 4 April. It seems that by this time they had sufficient vehicles for the whole unit but only 8 2 pdr anti-tank guns. The deficiency in guns was made good by the issue of four Breda guns from the RAOC base at Amirya.<sup>1002</sup> This brought the battery up to full

---

<sup>998</sup> *ibid*

<sup>999</sup> *ibid*

<sup>1000</sup> Argent, p. 41.

<sup>1001</sup> Dey, p. 9.

<sup>1002</sup> *ibid*

strength in weapons.<sup>1003</sup> They eventually arrived in the forward areas on 7 April. By this time, of course, Brega was lost and 'J' Battery were retreating into Tobruk',<sup>1004</sup>

Why, if the situation was as serious in the Western Desert as Wavell felt it was, and indeed it clearly was, was 3 RHA not put on alert in early March and then the whole Regiment ordered forward on, or before, 21 March? As can be seen all the elements needed, vehicles, guns, and trained men, were all readily available. Indeed it would not be an exaggeration to say that when one looks at the amount of equipment given to 2/3 Australian anti-tank gun Regiment there seems to have been enough resources available in Middle East Command to make two anti-tanks gun regiments operational in early March 1941. We may conclude that the bag had anti-tank guns in it.

## **MACHINE GUN BATTALION**

The contribution that The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, (1NF), might have made to the defence of Brega is perhaps far more direct and immediate than the other units we have examined. The 1NF were in early February guarding Italian P.O.W.s in Benghazi. However, by mid March their guard duties were rapidly coming to an end. A transit camp for P.O.W.s had been established at Barce and by 22 March 1NF were completely free of this duty. Their CO, Colonel E. O. Martin, 'immediately moved the Battalion out of Benghazi to an area in which training could be carried out, a few miles to the south'.<sup>1005</sup>

The Battalion was, however, short of transport. In an effort to ease the transport problems of the Battalion Italian diesel lorries were taken over and even some Italian drivers co-opted to drive for the Battalion.<sup>1006</sup> Although this did not completely resolve the lack of transport it did allow RHQ, 'W' and 'Z' Companies to become more or less

---

<sup>1003</sup> U.S. War Department publication, *Tactical and Technical Trends*: Article entitled; 'Use of Captured Italian Weapons' found in issue No. 7, September. 10, 1942.

<sup>1004</sup> Dey, p. 9.

<sup>1005</sup> Barclay, p. 56.

<sup>1006</sup> *ibid*

completely mobile. Therefore there seems no reason why at least one company of 1NF complete with their twelve Vickers medium machineguns could not have been moved down to Brega to support the troops already there.

## **INFANTRY**

It must be said that in regard to motorised infantry battalions Wavell could have given Neame his pick of a fine crop. Of all the British battalions in the Middle East only one, the 9th Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps (The Rangers), was sent to Greece. All the rest of the over twenty motorised infantry battalions available in the Middle East were to remain in the Delta or elsewhere on various non combat duties.

However, if we are to choose one of these many unemployed infantry battalions to send to help Latham at Brega then perhaps we could find no more suitable candidate than The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The King's Royal Rifle Corps (60<sup>th</sup> Rifles 1KRRC). 1KRRC had arrived in Egypt at the end of 1938 under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel William Henry Ewart Gott; M.C. Gott was born in Leeds, Yorkshire, on 13 August 1897. In WWI Gott had been a Lieutenant and at the end of the Great War, like Wavell, had remained in the army. In the inter war years he 'climbed the slow peacetime ladder of promotion to command of his battalion. Within three years of the outbreak of war he was a Lieutenant-General, and Churchill's nominee for command of the Eighth Army. His untimely and much lamented death (his aircraft was shot down near Cairo on the eve of his last great appointment) ended prematurely a brilliant career'.<sup>1007</sup>

Gott was an outstanding leader and it is interesting to note that although Wavell was credited (by some) with developing mechanised infantry tactics with both 6EIB and 2 Infantry Division in the 1930s it was, in fact, Gott who developed workable Motor Battalion procedures in the desert. As Wood the biographer of the KRRC was to write; Gott 'had been largely responsible for developing Motor Battalion theories and,

---

<sup>1007</sup> Wood, p. 106.

although he never actually commanded a battalion of the 60<sup>th</sup> in battle, his training of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was a major factor in its subsequent successes in the Desert War'.<sup>1008</sup>

Indeed it was partly from the excellent results obtained by Gott in his work with 1KRRC that the concept of the support group was formulated. The concept was, in fact, turned into reality in January 1940. The first support group 'consisted of 1KRRC, 2RB and 4 RHA, Colonel E. S. B. Williams commanded it for a short time. He was succeeded by Gott, soon after promoted to Brigadier'.<sup>1009</sup>

1KRRC fought more or less continually throughout Operation *Compass*. However, 'on 18<sup>th</sup> February the Battalion set off for Cairo for a period of rest after 10 continuous months in the desert. They reached Mena camp on the afternoon of 28<sup>th</sup> February. The total distance was 764 miles. Breakdowns were remarkably few, considering the long and arduous service of their vehicles'.<sup>1010</sup> It is perhaps worth noting here, and this was the case for most of the fighting units returning from the Western Desert in February 1941, that while it was felt by Wavell that his troop's vehicles would be incapable of going on the 350 or so miles to Tripoli they seemed perfectly capable of doing twice that distance and more moving back to Cairo.

The above being said, by late February, 1KRRC were back in Cairo. 'After a week at Mena they moved to Kasr-el-Nil Barracks to take over various guard duties, the most important of which were the G.O.C.'s house guard and the guards at G.H.Q., Middle East. It required great efforts to bring our desert-worn clothing and equipment to anything like the necessary standard; their reward was a message from General Wavell congratulating the first 60<sup>th</sup> Guard at his house on their turn-out'.<sup>1011</sup> It seems that Wavell felt he needed his house guarding more than Neame needed his garrison in the Western Desert reinforcing. Incredible as it might seem Wavell had, arguably, the most

---

<sup>1008</sup> Wood, p. 106.

<sup>1009</sup> Wake & Deedes, p. 34.

<sup>1010</sup> *ibid*, p. 46.

<sup>1011</sup> *ibid*, p. 47.

experienced and battle hardened battalion in the whole of the Middle East put on guard duties. He kept this fully equipped and ready to go battalion in Cairo when he was at the same time complaining that he had no troops to reinforce Neame who he acknowledged was under threat of imminent attack.

There appears on the face of it to be no rational reason for detailing 1KRRC to guard duties rather than dispatching them to the front. There were, as mentioned, many unemployed units in Cairo who could just as easily have undertaken this task and even a cursory examination of some of their war diaries or unit histories quickly confirms this fact.<sup>1012</sup> It would therefore be pointless to list all the units available; however, one unit stands out for mention. Wavell's father had been an officer in the Norfolk Yeomanry a regiment that the Wavell family obviously knew well. Indeed his father spent twelve years with the Regiment and would have taken command of it had it not been for the fact that it was posted to Burma and Colonel Wavell did not want to subject his young family to the rigors of the Burmese climate. He instead exchanged battalions with the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Black Watch.<sup>1013</sup> Nonetheless, the Norfolk connection with the Wavell family, as with many soldiers and their former regiments, remained strong. Indeed Wavell senior retired to Norfolk when his military career came to end.

With this Norfolk Regiment connection in mind we must now move to Cairo January 1941. On 16 January, 1941, the Norfolk Yeomanry, now an anti-tank gun regiment, arrived in the Middle East at Suez. Their biographer, Jeremy Bastin, tells us that; 'the train from Port Tewfik took the Regiment as far as El Qassasin from whence they were carried by truck into the sandy wasteland which was Tahag Camp. Without their guns

---

<sup>1012</sup> See *The Buffs* (Royal East Kent Regiment) G. Blaxland, *The Buffs* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972) 1<sup>st</sup> King's Dragoon Guards D. McCorquodale, *A History of the King's Dragoon Guards 1938-1945* (Printed for the Regiment in 1950).

<sup>1013</sup> Schofield, pp. 8/9.

and vehicles and unattached to any division, the Regiment had very little with which to occupy their time'.<sup>1014</sup>

They were to remain in this semi-idle state until their guns and vehicles arrived in late April. They did, it is true, take a turn watching for mines dropped in to the Suez Canal between 16 March and 19 April but this hardly excluded them from guard duties in Cairo. Indeed it confirms that they were completely capable of undertaking such tasks. So it might fairly be asked why when units such as the Norfolk Yeomanry were available for guard duties was such a valuable and experienced asset as 1KRRC given this task. The answer might be found in Wavell's own vanity. 1KRRC were it might be remembered by the time they arrived back in Cairo a celebrated and famous outfit. They were just the kind of unit Wavell liked to surround himself with. These men were gallant, brave, battle hardened bronzed warriors and now they were the Commander-in-Chiefs personal bodyguard. It might be seen as Caesar with his Praetorian Guard.

It is undeniable that had Wavell wanted to find a motorised infantry battalion to send to Neame he would not have had to look very far to find one. 1KRRC were right outside his door. Unfortunately for Neame and Latham Wavell, it seems, did not notice their presence. Like so many other units Wavell only ordered 1KRRC sent forward when it was far too late for them to be of any use to Neame. 'On 29 March the Battalion set out again for the Western Desert. By 1 April they were at Tobruk, where reports were received of Germans advancing east of Mersa el Brega'.<sup>1015</sup> This fully equipped battalion with a fine reputation for desert fighting and with a full scale of vehicles and weapons was left on guard duty when, as they were to show when eventually they were given orders to do so, they could be at the front and ready for battle in just three days.

---

<sup>1014</sup> Jeremy Bastin, *The Norfolk Yeomanry in War and Peace* (Fakenham: The Iceni Press, 1986) p. 113.

<sup>1015</sup> Wake & Deedes, p. 48.



## ARMOUR

However, perhaps the most available and easily satisfied of all Neame's requirements was the provision of armoured formations. It is worth remembering that armour was at the top of Wavell's shopping list for defence of the Western Desert. The immediate requirement, he wrote, was to make available armoured troops. It is clear from this opening statement that he had no idea what Neame already had in the way of armoured troops, the state and quantity of their equipment, or of even where they were stationed.

It will be recalled that while Wavell was writing his note there were already four tank regiments in the forward areas three of which had virtually no tanks. What was required by Neame's existing units was not additional armoured troops, that is not more tank regiments, but tanks. Had Wavell taken the time to discover what Neame already had in the way of armoured units he would have soon seen that what Neame really required to make his armoured units useable was tanks. In the case of 3H just 15 British cruisers would have made an enormous difference to its fighting capability.

Moreover, in the case of units with a few usable tanks, such as 3H, he needed to make it clear to Neame that they should stop wasting the little remaining strength they had left in unnecessary patrolling, order the fitters to concentrate on getting British tanks running instead of useless Italian tanks, and return to it, fifteen, out of the literally hundreds of British cruiser tanks he now had languishing in workshops in the Delta. Had these measures been ordered in early March then by 31 March 3H might have had some fighting ability worthy of the name.

In regard to 6 RTR being without British tanks there seems no reason why more of the many Vickers lights with 5 RTR could not have been made available to them. Moreover, there were as already mentioned hundreds of cruisers in workshops. However, if it was deemed that these sources were unavailable and that the only alternative was to try and equip them with Italian tanks then the place to do this was not

in the open around Beda Fomm but in Tobruk. In Tobruk there were proper workshops and the men would make little demand on resources in the forward areas. Although it has to be said that no matter what was done to the Italian tanks nothing would make them serviceable against German armour.

A perhaps more effective, and certainly far less costly, use for these Italian tanks might have been to use them in a static defence role at Brega. When the British defences at Mersa Matruh had been constructed a number of obsolete medium tanks had been dug in and used as armoured pill boxes complete with built in anti-tank gun. As there were well over a fifty M13 Italian tanks in the abandoned column at Beda Fomm, less than a hundred miles from Brega, and many powerful 10 ton lorries to tow them, it would not have been a difficult task to have moved some of these useless tanks down to Brega and dug them in.

Had this been done then the only useful component on the M13, its gun, might have been of some benefit to the defenders. 6 RTR had enough crews for 52 tanks and could quite easily have taken the Italian armour they had been issued down to Brega and dug them into the sand dunes between the village of Brega and the sea. Had this been done not only would they have made little demand on the fitters time they would at least have given any attack through the sand dunes some opposition. This would, at least, have been of some benefit to the defenders of Brega.

As for leaving 5 RTR, a fully equipped and ready to go tank unit, idle outside Tobruk for six weeks this truly was a waste of resources. This unit could, without any problem at all, have made a leisurely move up to Agedabia in six or seven days, and once there have been amalgamated with 3H to form a coherent fighting unit of nearly seventy cruiser and thirty light tanks. They would, perhaps, not all have been in full working order by late March even had this been done but they would undoubtedly have been in better shape than they were when the Germans actually attacked.

Had the move to Agedabia been made by 5 RTR in early March and the maintenance been carried out throughout the remainder of March on both Regiments tanks then when, or if, they were needed they could have moved forward the thirty or so miles to Brega in a few hours and given the defenders some useful support. Furthermore, 7 RTR, which was also sitting idle in Tobruk, could easily have been brought up to at least half unit strength in Matilda's, as in fact it was to some extent when Tobruk was besieged, and the balance made up of lights. There were far more than twenty five unused lights in the forward areas. Had this unit been added to the mix at Agedabia it would have given Neame an almost fully up to strength armoured brigade. Had this been done and the Italian M13 tanks dug in at Brega then the armoured element of the defence might have performed some useful function.

## **AIR POWER**

Although not on Wavell's original shopping list it is beyond doubt that Neame could have used additional air cover. Moreover, although absent from the list as a reinforcement Wavell had ambitious plans for any air resources Neame may have been able to muster. However, before reviewing what air resources Neame had and what additional squadrons might or might not have been made available to him it might perhaps be instructive to examine what Wavell expected Neame to achieve with his twelve bombers and thirty fighters dispersed over an operational area the size of France.

In Wavell's dispatch to Neame on 19 March he wrote; the enemy's supply and maintenance problem will be a most difficult and precarious one, and do everything in your power to render it more so. Forward dumps of stores are likely to be surest indication of offensive intentions of the enemy and should be attacked by air action as far as possible. Similarly, during the advance, attack on his maintenance system will be one of the best methods of bringing him to a standstill.<sup>1016</sup>

---

<sup>1016</sup> Connell, p. 387.

There are of course some glaringly obvious questions which might be asked about the content of this statement, not least the inference that Neame, a General with a VC who had served in the army with distinction for many years should need to be told that a sure indication that the enemy was preparing an offensive was his accumulation of war materials. Or that he should use his air resources to attack the enemy's supply dumps and supply lines. As for Neame needing to be told to attack his enemy's maintenance systems, (that is the enemy's supply convoys) this seems to be an action that any commander would attempt if possible.

However, leaving the rather basic advice to one side the more pertinent question here might be; what air resources had Wavell given Neame to carry out all these tasks. Neame's air component, to carry out all the above tasks, actually consisted of one Air Group, 202, commanded by Group Captain L. O. Brown with four squadrons. 3 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, (3 RAAF) and 73 Squadron, RAF (73 RAF), both flying Hurricane Mark I fighters. 6 Squadron, RAF, (6 RAF) with two flights flying Hurricane's and two flights flying Lysander tactical reconnaissance aircraft. 55 Squadron, RAF, (55 RAF) flying Blenheim light bombers.<sup>1017</sup> This gave Brown a tactical air force of thirty fighters, six reconnaissance planes and twelve bombers altogether forty eight aircraft. The chances of this small force being able to do all that Wavell was expecting of it were vanishingly small.

So as with other forces needed by Neame the question must be asked, could the air component of Neame's command have been increased without prejudicing any other operations. It will be remembered that at this time, because of Wavell's decisions to go to Greece and the continuing war in East Africa and the obligation to hold the desert flank, Middle East air resources were stretched three ways. However, by March 1941

---

<sup>1017</sup> Bickers, p. 54.

there were a great many squadrons in the command and more were arriving almost daily.

Plans had already been put in place in late 1940 to massively reinforce the Middle East throughout 1941. The defeat at Brega greatly accelerated the rate at which reinforcements were being sent to the Middle East but even before that new aircraft steadily reached the command. Although, it has to be admitted, that between January and March these replacements failed to keep pace with the losses, (184 aircraft lost 166 arrived as replacement), and some aircraft could not immediately be used for teething troubles, nonetheless the squadrons already in the theatre were, at the end of March, all nearly up to strength.<sup>1018</sup> Moreover, as mentioned, many more aircraft of all types were in the pipeline. By early May 328 were, in fact, already at sea. On 12 May fifty Hurricanes actually arrived at Alexandria. Moreover, by the end of May a further 880 had been dispatched.<sup>1019</sup> Therefore a certain amount risk taking with the aircraft already in the theatre, in view of the reinforcements known to be arriving and the imminent threat to the desert flank building, must at least have been worth considering.

So what squadrons were available in the Middle East to help Neame? As mentioned many squadrons were already assigned to theatres, four, for example, were assigned to Neame in the Western Desert. Others were in Greece, or about to go, and yet others in East Africa. However, there were still a good number of squadrons unallocated to fighting fronts. Careful scrutiny of the service deployment of squadrons in the Middle East reveals that at least a further six could have been made available to Neame and indeed as with so many other units when it was too late to be of much use to him many of these squadrons were suddenly assigned to the defence.

So what extra help might have been made available to Neame and Brown? To carry out Wavell's instructions Neame needed bomber squadrons. He had, as noted, one

---

<sup>1018</sup> Bickers, pp. 54/55.

<sup>1019</sup> *ibid*, p. 58.

Blenheim squadron 55 RAF however, also available were 45 Squadron RAF, and 30 Squadron RAF both equipped with Blenheims and 39 Squadron RAF equipped with Martin Maryland bombers.<sup>1020</sup> 45 Squadron, who were based at Cairo, moved up to help Brown on 4 April. 30 Squadron who in March were based on Crete, were uncommitted as the Germans had not yet even invaded Greece. The German attack on Greece did not start until 6 April. 39 Squadron were in March already in the desert at Fuka a few miles from Mersa Matruh.

In fighter squadrons there were several units uncommitted that March, however the two most readily available were 208 Squadron RAF and 274 Squadron RAF both flying Hurricanes.<sup>1021</sup> At the time of the attack 208 Squadron were stationed at Agedabia<sup>1022</sup> and 274 at Alexandria. To add to the list we might also look at the availability of 267 Squadron RAF which was flying a mixed bag of aircraft some Lysander's and some transport aircraft such as Lodestar's. Although not geared up for offensive action this squadron would have been very useful to Neame for both extra recon and load carrying of urgently needed supplies such as, perhaps, 6-inch howitzer ammunition.

Had the above squadrons been made available to Brown he would have been able to field over fifty fighters; somewhere in the region of fifty bombers and perhaps twenty reconnaissance and load carrying aircraft. Again had these various squadrons been allocated to Neame on 19 March when Wavell was giving his advice to Neame on how he might use such air resources then he might have had at least a fighting chance of carrying out Wavell's instructions? However, Neame was given no extra air resources during March. The first air reinforcements he received were 45 Squadron on 4 April far too few and much too late to save the day.

---

<sup>1020</sup> C. G. Jefford, *R. A. F. Squadrons* (Shrewsbury: Airlife Publishing, 1988) pp. 39/34/38.

<sup>1021</sup> *ibid*, pp. 69, 82.

<sup>1022</sup> Cull, p. 83.

## OVERVIEW

Thus, bearing in mind the above, this work can confidently claim to demonstrated, with some high degree of certainty, that had Wavell taken his own advice and implemented his own recommendations, he could, without predigesting any other operation, have found and sent forward in time for them to have been of some use, significant reinforcements to save the British position in North Africa. The bag was, in reality, far from empty.

So, it seems fair to ask, if these reinforcements had, in fact, been sent forward, how would their arrival have effected the situation on the ground at Brega? Starting with air defence it will be remembered that Latham had only two Bofors anti-aircraft guns in the forward areas. This scale of issue was quite clearly inadequate to defend four miles of front and indeed the lack of anti-aircraft defence was a huge contributing factor in the German breakthrough. However, as has been demonstrated, twenty four Bofors anti-aircraft guns could have been diverted from the defence of the Suez Canal, where they were totally useless, and sent to Latham well before the Germans attacked.

Their deployment would of course have been at Latham's discretion but it seems likely that had they been ordered forward in early March most of his main defence line could have been given at least some degree of anti-aircraft protection. Two anti-aircraft guns were totally inadequate twenty six on the other hand were a potent defence.

The same assessment might be given to all Latham's units. The strength and depth of his armoured car screen, for example, could have been significantly enhanced by the early arrival of 11H. They were destined to be sent forward anyway so why leave it until it was too late? At least two Troops of 11H, say thirty cars, could have been sent forward to help and reinforce 1 KDG from early March onwards, certainly after 19 March when Wavell returned from the desert. Had this been done it would have nearly doubled Latham's armoured car strength and also place virtually no extra strain on his

resources. The men of 11H were even more self-sufficient than even the most experienced desert hands and if they had arrived say in the last week of March would only have had to look after themselves for a week or so before Rommel attacked. This amount of unsupported time to these men would have been no problem at all.

The mobilisation of 3 RHA and its precious anti-tank guns was never going to be a problem and even when virtually at the last minute they were finally ordered forward they managed to get their batteries on the road in a remarkably short space of time. When Wavell wrote out his shopping list of units he felt Neame needed in early March there is no doubt that had he instructed that 3 RHA be brought up to battle readiness this could have been done with a minimum amount of delay and at little cost to the greater war effort. Everything that they needed to make themselves battle ready was already at hand. Indeed it is in many respects astonishing that in view of the potential threat of attack by tanks that this very rare anti-tank gun unit was ever allowed to be denuded of vehicles and guns in the first place. Even had no enemy threat been considered imminent it would have seemed sensible to keep this valuable and scarce asset as near battle readiness as possible.

However, in view of the accepted knowledge that enemy tanks were being landed at Tripoli, and would thus at some point probably pose a threat somewhere; it seems incredible that this unit should have been rendered unusable for so long.

In regard to how they may have been able to assist Latham we may look to the afternoon engagement of the single Battery of 3 RHA which did get to Brega. The intervention of just nine two pounders effectively broke up a concerted German tank attack and disabled at least three tanks. We may only speculate how much more beneficial 3 RHA would have been to the defence if all thirty six of their guns had been available to Latham. As it was on the day after the battle; 'hardly any of the Panzers, which had been unloaded in Tripoli in tiptop condition, could still be described as fit for



action. The inadequately filtered engines had long since swallowed too much sand and dust, worn pistons were knocking worryingly, and tracks and bogey wheels were in a dreadful state'.<sup>1023</sup> The question might fairly be asked had Streich's armour been confronted by the whole of 3 RHA on the 31<sup>st</sup> at Brega how many of his tanks would have been able to resume the attack on 1<sup>st</sup> April?

The contribution to the defence made by the sixteen guns of 104 RHA was huge. Commenting on the fighting around Cemetery Hill John Delaney says; 'the tanks of 5<sup>th</sup> Panzer Regiment moved forward and were engaged by 25 pdr field guns of 104 Regiment Royal Horse Artillery, deployed behind the hill. The guns, firing over open sights, brought the advance to a halt. Probing attacks by German infantry and panzers continued throughout the morning, but the British infantry held firm at the base of the hill, ably supported by their RHA colleagues'.<sup>1024</sup>

However, as with all Latham's units there were just too few of them. Sixteen guns could not adequately cover a four mile long defence line. That being said the remedy was close at hand. Why the sixteen guns of 1 RHA were not added to the defence, as they were only two miles in rear of the action, is beyond comprehension. These guns alone may well have tipped the balance the defenders way, at least on the first day of action. The only mitigating excuse, and it seems to be a weak one, is that these guns nominally belonged to Rimington's 3AB and not to Latham's Support Group but to leave them unused for the whole of the day when they could so easily have been brought into action seems like military correctness gone mad.

Moreover, the failure to order forward the eight 6-inch howitzers of 7 MAR seems equally remiss. Throughout March 7 MAR were completely ready for battle, they had guns, vehicles and ammunition. All that had to be done was to order them forward. What this unit's firepower would have done to Rommel's infantry forming up behind

---

<sup>1023</sup> Heckmann, p. 112.

<sup>1024</sup> Delaney, p. 15.

Cemetery Hill can only be imagined but it must be calculated that as a battery of 6-inch howitzers had the same hitting power as a Royal Navy cruiser that it would not have been insignificant.

We might now turn to the infantry component of Latham's brigade. The three companies of infantry of 9RB and their supporters, the twelve Vickers machineguns of 1NF, could never effectively cover a four mile wide defensive position. 'The first attacks by the 5<sup>th</sup> Light Division supported by artillery fire and Stuka dive bombers quickly pushed back the defending British infantry, the 1<sup>st</sup> Tower Hamlets Rifles, from their trenches on Cemetery Hill, the only piece of high ground on the battlefield'.<sup>1025</sup> What was required to give the defence, even with the added firepower alluded to above, a fighting chance of defending Brega was another battalion of infantry and a second company of machine gunners.

As has been demonstrated both were readily available. 1KRRC were, as mentioned, dispatched to Brega when it was already too late. There was no logical reason why these troops could not have been moved forward, at least to Benghazi, in early March when Wavell says he identified the potential shortcomings in his desert army and indicated that it needed reinforcing. Indeed had 1KRRC been brigaded with 9RB in late March, they too could have moved down to Brega on 22 March, and taken with them one of the machinegun companies of INF. This would have doubled the infantry component of Latham's brigade and would have enabled him to deploy his battalions in both greater depth and covering a far longer front. Moreover, had they taken with them the thousands of mines which were ready and waiting for them in the Delta and utilised the miles of Italian barbed wire available in Tobruk they might have made Brega not just difficult to take but almost impregnable.

---

<sup>1025</sup> Delaney, pp. 14/15.

Again we can only speculate what such reinforcement might have contributed to the defence of Brega but it is worth considering here that had Ponath's 8<sup>th</sup> Machinegun Battalion been confronted by a whole battalion instead of one platoon of infantry then his late afternoon breakthrough through the sand dunes might have been less successful than it was, indeed it might well have been heavily defeated.

Finally in regard to ground forces we may look to the shambolic state of 3AB. The failure by both Gambier-Parry and Rimington to get this unit into some kind of fighting condition was truly scandalous. They had six long weeks to make their regiments battle worthy and squandered every one of them. There was no reason why 6 RTR could not have taken their Italian tanks down to Brega and dug them into the sand dunes at least then they might have served some useful purpose.

The time taken to move 5 RTR forward was ludicrous. It was known in early March that German armour was being landed at Tripoli it could, therefore, only be a matter of time before this enemy armour moved onto the offensive. Had 5 RTR been moved to the Brega area in early March they might have been able to make some useful contribution to the defence as it was by sending them in late March they were no value whatsoever.

Furthermore, the inability of 3H to make any worthwhile contribution to the defence was a totally self inflicted wound. There was no need to send all the British cruisers back to the Delta just leaving 15 for 3H would have made all the difference to the fighting ability of this unit. The release of officers to go on leave and the leisurely way in which the work on the light tanks was carried out is hard to understand. The tanks in this unit were virtually all the possible serviceable tanks in the forward areas their immediate return to fighting ability should have been their COs primary concern not the issuing of leave passes.

As for the failure of Neame to resurrect 7 RTR; this must be seen as a major lost opportunity. While reviving this unit would have been problematical the benefits of bringing this unit back to even half fighting strength would have been enormous. What the Matilda's would have brought to the defence of Brega would have been comparable to their vital contribution to the defence of Tobruk. Their armour could keep out all but the most powerful of German anti-tank shells, the mighty 88 mm, and as the Germans were hard pressed to deploy these weapons in an anti-tank role at Brega the Matildas would have acted like mobile pillboxes almost immune to shot and shell.

Turning now to the contribution that the RAF might have made on 31 March we may also see that their contribution could have been far more beneficial to the defenders than it was. If the squadrons identified instead of sitting idle on their various airbases had been mobilised and added into Neame's order of battle they might on their own have been able to thwart Rommel's advance.

Wavell was of course perfectly correct when he told Neame that he should attack his enemy's supply columns, dumps and advancing troops. Such attacks invariably bring advantageous results. We of course will never now know how successful or other wise such attacks would have been at Brega. However, we can speculate that the twenty mile long column of German and Italian transport held in the Brega gap by Latham's infantry and guns would have presented any combat pilot with a target that most could only dream of. Had the bomber and fighter pilots of the squadrons who could have been made available to Brown been given this opportunity it seems perfectly reasonable to speculate that many of Rommel's precious trucks and tanks would have been blazing by the end of the day.

So we may say with some confidence, concurring with Ralph Bennett, that the enforced British retreat to the Egyptian frontier was not 'the consequence of the departure of most of the army which had annihilated the Italians. It was in great

measure due to the defects of military tactics and foresight, which were themselves but one facet of that opaqueness of understanding, narrowness of outlook, and lack of professionalism which were to wreck so many of the desert army's plans'.<sup>1026</sup>

As Dill was to write on 19 April; 'I realise fully the difficult position in which Wavell finds himself. I realise the mistake he and I have made, i.e., underestimating the forces the Germans could concentrate and maintain in Cyrenaica'.<sup>1027</sup> However, his realisation was now of little consequence what could have been done so easily to defend Brega, prior to the German attack, could now never be done.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

There can be little argument, when reviewing the mass of books written on the desert war, that virtually every aspect of the conflict in North Africa has been extensively, and in many cases very thoroughly, researched and written about by a great many authors. That being said the Battle for Mersa el Brega stands out as being one of the few aspects of the desert war which has been almost airbrushed from history by desert war authors.

Consequently this thesis is not a reappraisal of the battle building on existing accounts. Nor is it a more detailed review of events that have already been chronicled by desert war authors because there are no in depth accounts of the battle for Brega; indeed there are very few references to the battle at all. This work is, in fact, an original and unique piece of research. It seeks to fill the void which exists in the literature between the well documented arrival of the Germans in North Africa and their attack on British forces protecting the desert flank at Mersa el Brega.

---

<sup>1026</sup> Bennett, p. 34.

<sup>1027</sup> Raugh, p. 200.

Moreover, while it seeks to explain the events of 31 March when the Germans attacked Brega it also endeavours to clarify, and accurately describe, the long sequence of events which led to the British defeat. The work sheds new light on the part that the various personalities involved in the British defeat played; highlighting what they did and what they did not do to avert the disaster.

Indeed, researching the part played by senior commanders and politicians in the defeat has revealed a significantly different interpretation of how the events surrounding the battle for Brega unfolded. In this respect research for the thesis has revealed that accepting as totally accurate the accounts of those directly involved in an historical event, especially an historical event where a serious defeat has occurred, or accounts written by friends of the principal players, should be treated with extreme caution.

Several highly contentious aspects of the early desert war, such as the highly questionable transfer of an infantry division from the western desert to the Sudan by the C-in-C Wavell, just when complete victory in the western desert was possible, or the deployment of substantial forces to Greece which has been wrongly attributed by many authors to Churchill when evidence confirms that it was Wavell's decision, brings into question the reliability of certain authors research and the conclusions they deliver. Furthermore, biased and inaccurate research by authors, which has been a recurring handicap in the preparation of this thesis, has been avoided to such an extent that the author feels confident to declare that the narrative offered is both impartial and accurate.

In conclusion we may see that from the evidence presented in the previous chapters it is clear that responsibility for the defeat of British forces at Brega and the long years of fighting in the desert that were to follow, lies almost exclusively, with the senior commanders involved and with C-in-C Wavell in particular. Wavell's complex, and as we have seen in many respects flawed, personality created the peculiar set of

circumstances which evolved throughout the early part of his tenure of command in the Middle East, leading ultimately to defeat on 31 March 1941.

It is, perhaps, interesting to note that Wavell, the man who would rise to the very pinnacle of military command, from virtually his earliest recorded comments, tells us that he never really wanted a military career. Wavell was to write; 'I never felt any inclination to a military career, but it would have taken more independence of character than I possessed to avoid it'.<sup>1028</sup> A former teacher of Wavell's, M. J. Rendell, perhaps summed up best how Wavell's career should have gone and where his real talents lay. 'He was "a sound classic" in the Winchester tradition, with prospects of an excellent career in the Civil Service, in the Church or in education. In a boy with as deep and sensitive a vein of poetry in him it was curious that he later recorded, he preferred Latin to Greek'.<sup>1029</sup>

Wavell was indeed, as many have dubbed him, not least his friend and biographer John Connell, a scholar and was certainly not temperamentally inclined to military command and definitely not suited to high command in time of war. As his headmaster was to observe to his father Wavell had sufficient brains to find his way in other walks of life.<sup>1030</sup>

However, from this unlikely beginning Wavell would gain a series of commands and promotions which would by August 1939, right on the cusp of war, see him in command of arguably Britain's most important overseas possession, Middle East Command. The decisions he would make, the promotions he would indorse and the plans he would promote would dictate in large measure British fortunes in the coming war. In regard to making these crucial decisions it could well be argued that he spectacularly failed.

---

<sup>1028</sup> Connell, p. 34.

<sup>1029</sup> *ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>1030</sup> *ibid*, p. 34.

It might be thought that when Wavell arrived in Egypt in August 1939, the hub of British military and political power in the Middle East, he would have immediately immersed himself in the many unresolved preparations necessary to put Middle East Command on a secure war footing. His command was after all essential to British war interests, containing as it did the Suez Canal and most of Britain's oil supplies, and as war looked imminent, securing both these strategic possessions was obviously essential.

Sadly this was not Wavell's *Modus-Operandi*. His first job on arrival in the Middle East was to establish for himself some luxury accommodation which he did most successfully. Then he was to embark on a series of tours of his vast command, complaining all the while about the poor state of the aircraft the Royal Air Force had provided for him. Furthermore, his liking for early morning swimming, playing golf, riding, going to the races, writing poetry, finishing off his biography of Allenby's life and of course looking after the needs of his wife and three teenage daughters all consumed much of his remaining time.

When war finally came in September 1939 it might have been expected that Wavell would put on hold his domestic pleasures and restrict his travel plans and concentrate instead on placing his command on a total war footing. It might also have been expected that as these arrangements were being put in place that he would press his home government to supply the many war materials he was lacking. However, life in Egypt and in the Middle East in general, changed very little, both militarily and socially, in the first year of the war.<sup>1031</sup> Wavell, even though he was surrounded by potentially hostile enemy troops in Libya and East Africa made virtually no significant preparations to increase the fighting ability of his command.

He instead left virtually all matters pertaining to improving his commands military preparedness to his second in command General Wilson. This may be considered to be

---

<sup>1031</sup> Coats, pp. 52/53



the first of many serious and potentially costly mistakes made by Wavell. His preference of flying to meet dignitaries and junior offices in far distant commands and territories consumed much of his time as did his social life. Time and energy which might more profitably have been spent on reorganising his army and satisfying many of its glaring deficiencies such as the provision of anti-tank and anti personnel mines of which there were precious few in the Middle East.

In December 1939 Wavell was recalled to Britain to appraise the C.I.G.S on the situation in the Middle East giving him an opportunity to tell the Chiefs of Staff face to face what war materials he needed. However, although he indicated that he was short of modern fighter aircraft, had insufficient transport and not enough artillery pieces he failed to press home the urgency of his situation. Instead he indulged in discussions of what might happen if Germany attacked the Balkans and what responses might be made in such an eventuality. He confidently told the C.I.G.S during the course of these talks that he believed the Germans would not attack in the West.<sup>1032</sup>

When the Germans did attack in the West and France fell in June 1940, Britain's position in the Middle East was significantly weakened. The French who up until that time had served as a support and bulwark to British military security in the region were now not there. However, many of the French troops in the various French colonies surrounding Egypt, Syria in particular, were inclined at least at first to come over to the British side and fight as Free French a situation both Churchill and de Gaulle saw as very beneficial to allied war aims.

However, even with the encouragement of his Prime Minister, Wavell felt that he would be more secure, not less secure, if he left this group of well armed and well organised, and now hostile, troops on his borders. This inclined him to reject Churchill's advice and leave the various French colonial military establishments intact.

---

<sup>1032</sup> John Kennedy, *The Business of War* (London: Hutchinson, 1957) pp. 41/42.

This failure to encourage French colonial soldiers to rally to the allied cause, which could be seen by virtually everybody bar Wavell as the sensible thing to do, was yet another grave mistake. The Vichy French Government turned against the British in the Middle East and Wavell eventually had to fight the very men who only a few months before could have been fighting for him.<sup>1033</sup>

The fall of France prompted Wavell to ask London for the war materials he should have demanded in December 1939. Churchill viewed these requests with both surprise and a little annoyance. Although Wavell was still short of certain types of equipment, such as transport, modern tanks and fighter aircraft, he nonetheless had been massively reinforced. Therefore, as Wavell's shopping list increased so did Churchill's desire for results.<sup>1034</sup>

In August 1940 Wavell is again summoned home for talks. Again an opportunity arose for Wavell to press his case for more modern equipment and to acquaint himself with his political master. However, this meeting did not go well. Wavell, because of his taciturn and uncommunicative nature, alienated Churchill, his political chief, to such an extent that from this time on Churchill never liked, nor trusted, his military commander. As Lewin observes; 'the deeper truth is this: as they sat round the conference table a chasm opened between the Prime Minister and his Commander-in-Chief that the future might bridge but would never close'.<sup>1035</sup> There is little doubt that Churchill wanted at this point to sack Wavell but on this occasion as on future occasions Wavell was saved by Dill one of his few friends and by Eden a man of a very forgiving disposition.<sup>1036</sup>

When the Italians eventually attacked Wavell's forces in the Western Desert in strength in September 1940 they made slow and unspectacular progress eventually crossing into Egypt and occupying Sidi Barrani just fifty miles inside the border.

---

<sup>1033</sup> Raugh, pp. 70/71.

<sup>1034</sup> Schofield, p.149.

<sup>1035</sup> Lewin, p.36.

<sup>1036</sup> Schofield, p.152.

However, because of the neglect of the British army in Egypt and its lack of modern equipment no counterattack could immediately be made. The counterattack would have to wait until the new equipment that Churchill, despite his dislike of Wavell, had insisted should be sent to Egypt, arrived in late September and October.

The British counterattack duly commenced in December. This operation, *Compass*, was a spectacular success. However, as we have seen, General O'Connor who planned, coordinated and executed this operation received hardly any credit for his hard work. The press carefully kept in Cairo by Wavell and initially receiving all their information about the operation from Wavell quickly dubbed the operation the "Wavell Push" or the "Wavell Five Day Raid". Eager to assign the success to someone the media mistakenly gave the credit for the operations success to Wavell; credit Wavell did very little publicly to dispel.

Despite the initial success of Operation *Compass* Wavell after only three days of fighting without telling his field commander suddenly removed half his fighting forces and transport, and sent them to another theatre. This caused the advance to be curtailed and retarded the capture of the vital ports of Derna and Tobruk by nearly four weeks. Nonetheless, despite Wavell's debilitating order O'Connor still managed to rout the Italians. At the battle of Beda Fomm O'Connor utterly defeated his Italian opponents and the road to Tripoli was virtually undefended and the city could undoubtedly have been taken. The prize was there for the taking but again Wavell intervened and denied O'Connor his opportunity to take Tripoli and throw the Italians out of Libya.

Wavell was now inclined to send troops to Greece. The decision to send troops to Greece rather than Tripoli was not because this was sound military logic but more to appease his political master Churchill who quite naturally wanted to regain a foothold in Europe. However, even Churchill quickly had his doubts about the wisdom of going to Greece only allowing the move to take place on the back of reassurances from Wavell

that the desert flank was secure. The move to Greece was a thoroughly disastrous decision which not only lost the British the opportunity to take Tripoli but nearly cost them the war when the German's in overwhelming numbers routed the British army sent to Greece. Wavell's appreciation that an attack on Greece would be successful proved to be costly to the extent that the British lost thousands of men, hundreds of guns and tens of thousands of tons of equipment. As Ralph Bennett observes; 'Wavell's appreciation was wrong when he made it, and it became more wrong with every day that passed'.<sup>1037</sup>

Moreover, while Wavell was concentrating on Greece he was ignoring the Western Desert. Throughout the crucial period from the end of the Beda Fomm battle to the German/Italian counter attack on 31 March Wavell failed to take seriously the threat building up on his desert flank. Perhaps his first and most serious failing in this regard was the selection of the senior officers he appointed to guard Cyrenaica. As Strawson comments so damningly; 'General Neame, who knew nothing of desert fighting, commanded'.<sup>1038</sup> Wavell's appointment of Neame to command his vital Cyrenaica frontier, the peg upon all else hung, an officer without recent combat experience, possessing no competence in mobile warfare, and having no administrative qualifications, is at best highly questionable and must be viewed as a mistake of the first magnitude.

A mistake compounded by Wavell's incomprehensible failure to give Neame any firm orders, and certainly no orders to set his command area for defence. An omission which is all the more incomprehensible when one considers that even if the command was not going to be attacked at the end of March, it was definitely anticipated, even by Wavell, that it was likely to be attacked in early May. As Ralph Bennett says; 'it was Wavell's grievous error in believing that he could denude the desert with impunity that

---

<sup>1037</sup> Bennett, p. 30.

<sup>1038</sup> Strawson, *The Battle for North Africa*, p. 47.

underlay the disasters of the next few months, prevented the defence of Cyrenaica, and lost almost all that O'Connor had won'.<sup>1039</sup> Wavell consistently claims, throughout March, that he understood that he must reinforce Neame and yet makes no preparations to send units forward to make up his deficiencies.

Moreover, it seems that Neame's preparations prior to the German attack were less than effective. As De Guingand observes Neame knew his command was vulnerable and yet seems to have been incapable, even though he knew he was going to be attacked, of setting his command for defence: 'The Western Desert Force was gradually striped of its power – in the air and on the ground – and left a mere skeleton of its former self. No one felt happy about this; I know the new commander, General Neame, expressed his anxiety concerning the situation. Having made his protests he loyally did what he could with the inadequate resources at his disposal'.<sup>1040</sup>

Neame certainly made his protest to Wavell and was without doubt loyal; however, evidence would seem to suggest that he did not make the best use of the resources at his disposal. His failure, for example, to instruct Gambier-Parry to get 3H battle ready and to move 5 RTR and 1 RHA up to the front long before the Germans attacked, which could so easily have been achieved, must be seen as a major contributing factor in the German breakthrough.

Nor can a lack of sound and early intelligence be blamed for the defeat. With their undoubted accumulation of knowledge on enemy intentions evidence seems to suggest that Wavell and his field commanders should have been well placed to meet the growing threat building up against them. However, when the attack finally came, Wavell and Neame were completely unprepared to parry the German/Italian thrust. Can we believe Wavell's claim that the German attack came as such a complete surprise to him, that his lack of preparation to meet it is perfectly understandable and acceptable?

---

<sup>1039</sup> Bennett, p. 29.

<sup>1040</sup> De Guingand, p. 50.

Clausewitz cautions that ‘many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain. What one can reasonably ask of an officer is that he should possess a standard of judgment, which he can gain only from knowledge of men and affairs and from common sense. He should be guided by the laws of probability’.<sup>1041</sup>

In the Middle East from mid February 1941 onwards the laws of probability were without doubt indicating that in the very near future the British forces stationed in Cyrenaica were going to be attacked. Wavell, however, seems to have lacked the common sense to appreciate the imminent danger Cyrenaica was in. Indeed a review of the intelligence Wavell and Middle East Command received throughout March, and recounted earlier in this work, suggests that an attack in the near future was almost a certainty and certainly should have been prepared for.

The certainty of attack, which became evermore evident to Wavell when he finally went to see Neame on 16/18 March, was not, evidence suggests, matched by a suitably urgent response. Indeed the response by Wavell articulated at the time and subtly modified in later accounts reveals how little he understood of Neame’s problems. His account of the state he claims he found Neame’s armour in clearly demonstrates that he, in fact, failed to fully appraise himself of the condition of the armour. An error he compounded by not fully understanding, the terrain, supply, deployment or fighting ability of Neame’s army.

Moreover, perhaps, the leisurely attitude to deployment of units and the undetectable response to the late March German advances, which suggested that more serious advances were at the very least being contemplated, must be viewed as the most reprehensible of misjudgements. The German preparations for attack and their occupation of El Agheila on 24 March were all well observed by Wavell and should

---

<sup>1041</sup> Clausewitz, p.117.

have sounded the loudest alarm bells. Indeed with the imminence of attack so obvious it seems incomprehensible that Neame and Gambier-Parry should have wasted time and energy on trying to get the captured Italian tanks serviceable when even had they been made to run their fighting ability would have been negligible.

On 6 March Wavell wrote; 'the immediate requirements seem to be to see what reinforcements we can make available of armoured troops, anti-tank guns, artillery, anti-aircraft; to build up properly distributed reserves; to see that we have sufficient means of defence such as anti-tank mines'.<sup>1042</sup> It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves here exactly what Wavell was proposing, but never achieved, taking each element in turn. As for the lonely plight of 1 KDG there was absolutely nothing to prevent at least two of 11Hs squadrons, thirty armoured cars, from being sent forward in early March to assist them. The transportation of a few tanks to Tobruk, say fifteen cruisers and eight Matilda's, would have caused Wavell hardly any extra logistical burden, but would have significantly enhanced the capability of the defence. Indeed when it was far too late for these reinforcements to be of any use all the above movements, and far more, were undertaken.

Wavell next singles out anti-tank guns as a needed requirement. As has been mentioned earlier there were hardly any anti-tank gun regiments in the Middle East at this time. The only one even remotely available in early March was 3 RHA. But almost as he was writing that Neame urgently needed anti-tank guns his subordinates were busily stripping his only unit with this capability of its weapons and transport. Even if this unit was not desperately required for the defence at Brega it surely would be needed at some time in the near future. Dismantling this unit must be seen as the height of folly. But perhaps the question to be asked here is why was it done? Units such as 3 RHA could not be acquired at the drop of a hat.

---

<sup>1042</sup> Connell, p. 385.

As it happened, however, although 3 RHA were dismembered and denuded of their weapons and transport they were still able, when called upon to do so, to take to the field of battle with amazing alacrity. There is absolutely no doubt that had Wavell ordered that this unit be made ready for the Western Desert in early March they would have answered the call. As it was when they were called upon to make themselves ready and move forward they did so with remarkable speed and efficiency. But again, by the time they were asked to make ready for the Western Desert, it was too late.

In field artillery units Neame already had three regiments under his direct command, 1 RHA, 104 RHA, and 51<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment; however, whether Wavell even knew of their existence is highly debatable. If he had known of their whereabouts it seems remarkable that he did not immediately order that they be added to the defence. However, there is no evidence to confirm that he even enquired about the state of Neame's artillery. Had he done so he would have quickly seen that none of the units were in the forward areas, nor were they about to be deployed to the forward areas. Adequate artillery units existed in Neame's command area but with no orders coming from his commanding officer to deploy them, because at this stage Wavell was still telling Neame that he would not be attacked until May, Neame quite naturally left them un-deployed.

104 RHA and their 16 25 pdr guns were allocated to the defence of Brega; however, again like virtually all other units assigned to the defence, they would not take up their place in the line until it was nearly too late. 1 RHA would likewise not move forward until almost the eve of battle. 51<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment would never be deployed forward they were destined to remain on the Benghazi escarpment with the Australians unused and only able to show their true quality when Tobruk was besieged.

Had these three regiments been ordered forward in early March with their forty eight guns, there is no reason why they could not have established sound firing positions.



They might then have been able to impeded, perhaps stop, the German advance. However, Wavell makes no enquiries as to the quantity or whereabouts of Neame's artillery nor does he give any order that more should be added. Which brings us to the mystery of why the eight 6 inch howitzers of 7 Medium Regiment were not assigned, by Wavell, to Neame? These highly effective and devastating guns with their six mile range would give any defence a distinct advantage. They were just the kind of weapons Neame needed and just the kind of weapons Wavell said Neame required. They were unused, uncommitted and ready to go why Wavell did not send them to Neame is incomprehensible.

Can Wavell blame his subordinate commanders for the defeat at Brega? When Wavell wrote to O'Connor after the war he made a point of criticising all his senior commanders in Cyrenaica, Neame, Gambier-Parry and Rimington, and for good measure berated others that were not even present such as Caunter. Wavell was especially critical of Neame whom he felt had let him down badly and had failed to make the best use of the resources he had been given. However, as we shall see, although the incompetence of his officers was a defence Wavell was desperate to promote; it is difficult to blame them completely for the loss of Brega.

Indeed, when one looks at Neame's performance over the six weeks he was in command it is difficult to see what more he realistically could have done to avert the defeat. He correctly identified that there was a distinct possibility that his command would be attacked sooner rather than later and dutifully reported his concerns to Wavell on numerous occasions. He could quite clearly see that the forces under his command were in no position to resist even a modest advance and asked his commander-in-chief for adequate reinforcements.<sup>1043</sup>

---

<sup>1043</sup> Neame's Report on Operations in Cyrenaica 27<sup>th</sup> February to 7<sup>th</sup> April 1941 CAB 106/767

The response from Wavell to both of these concerns was unequivocal. Wavell's advice to Neame was that he was not to worry or concern himself with the Italian/German build up in Tripoli; they were not going to attack before May at the earliest and might not attack even then. As Barnett observes in *The Desert Generals* 'Wavell saw no danger: British Intelligence considered that the newly arrived Rommel and his fledgling Italo-German force could not be ready to advance before May'.<sup>1044</sup>

As for the poor state of Neame's army it was Wavell who had ordered that all the armour should be returned to the Delta not Neame. There was no military imperative forcing Wavell to order that virtually all the armour should be withdrawn from the desert. None of the desert armour was sent to Greece or East Africa. In regard to Neame making better use of the forces he had, again, it is difficult to blame Neame for the deployments he made or the pitiful state of his army. The poor state of his armoured units was not because he failed to acknowledge their deficiencies or because he did not try to get reinforcements. Neame fully understood how weak his armoured units were and tried desperately to make Wavell send him replacements, however, all his requests for reinforcements were rejected by Wavell.

As for making better use of the armour he did have this was primarily the responsibility of Gambier-Parry the divisional commander and Rimington the brigade commander. Neame had a right to expect that both these officers, as professional tank commanders, would know how to get the best out of the tanks they had been given. Instead as we have seen they not only wasted the time they had to get their tanks serviceable they squandered the little remaining strength the tanks had left in them in useless patrolling and the forced march of 5 RTR. With regard to the forced march made by 5 RTR in its move from El Adem to Brega in late March during which nearly half of the tanks in this unit broke down, this was a particularly wasteful manoeuvre. It

---

<sup>1044</sup> Barnett, p. 63.

was well known by both Rimington and Drew that the engines in some of these tanks were very worn and that consequently if they were to have any chance of remaining in action they would need intense maintenance and very careful handling.

The above being said it is difficult to blame Neame for the damage that the hasty and late move had on these tanks. From the time of their arrival at El Adem in February until their movement order in late March Neame was not directly in command of this unit, indeed, it was very nearly returned to the Delta. Had this unit been placed earlier under Neame's direct command he may well have ordered them forward in early March to the Divisional Workshops outside Benghazi. Once there not only could more intense maintenance have been undertaken but they would then only have had a 120 mile advance to get them to Brega. Again we will never know if the earlier move and the benefit of bigger and better workshops would have resulted in more tanks of 5 RTR being fit for action but it would be unlikely that this would not have been a realistic outcome.

It is true that Neame could have ordered the whole of 1<sup>st</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers forward thus giving Latham the benefit of 36 additional heavy machine guns. But again was such an order the responsibility of the theatre commander or the divisional commander? The other unit Neame might have been able to order forward was 51<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Regiment with their field guns. But these guns had already been assigned to 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Division. Consequently it is more than probable that General Morshead would have objected strongly to the only artillery his infantry possessed being taken away from them. However, had the Australians been returned to Tobruk, as they undoubtedly should have been in view of their lack of transport and equipment, then 51<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment would have been free to support other units.

Within the rest of Neame's command there simply were no further useful units which could have been deployed by him to Brega. However, even if there had been

deployable units available it might well be asked why should Neame make any effort to defend his command at all? Neame had no orders from his commander-in-chief to set his command for defence, indeed quite the contrary he had orders to treat his command as a static and unthreatened province and to act as a provincial governor not as a military commander about to be attacked.<sup>1045</sup>

Had Wavell given orders to Neame instructing him to do everything he could to defend his command then it is more than probable, given Neame's training and known ability, that he would have tackled the task in a thoroughly professional and skilful manner. However, as mentioned, Wavell gave Neame no such orders.

So what of Neame's subordinate commanders? In view of the lamentable performance of both Gambier-Parry and Rimington when they were called upon to defend Cyrenaica it might well be asked should their inadequacies have been recognised earlier. The short answer to this question is that the inadequacies of both men were soon recognised by their respective senior officers. Neame although he does not directly criticize either officer makes many scathing references to the poor state of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division in his after action report.

As for Wavell's claim that he had nothing left in the bag, that is to say no combat or support units available to reinforce Neame, this claim is nothing short of ludicrous. It will be remembered that as he was telling Neame that he had nothing to send him in the way of reinforcements he was, at the same time, being guarded by one of the most, if not the most, desert worthy infantry battalion in the whole of the Middle East 1 KRRC. His bag was far from empty; in fact, if we are continuing the golfing metaphor it contained a glittering array of clubs.

Moreover, throughout March, as has been demonstrated, a whole series of combat and support units became available in the Middle East. In Neame's own forces, as

---

<sup>1045</sup> Neame's Report on Operations in Cyrenaica 27<sup>th</sup> February to 7<sup>th</sup> April 1941 CAB 106/767

mentioned, three companies of 1 NF, with 36 precious medium machine guns, were stationed in Benghazi unable to join the defence for lack of transport. All that was required to get these guns into the line was the provision of 36 30 cwt trucks one for each gun and four 3 ton lorries to transport the ammunition and heavy kit. 40 vehicles when at the same time 8,500 were on their way to Greece.

Both anti aircraft and anti-tank gun units were lying idle in the Delta and could easily have been ordered forward at any time. Moreover, the 8 6 inch howitzers of 7 Medium Regiment were likewise sat idle in the Delta. We know that 1KRRC and the anti tank, anti aircraft gun and artillery units in the Delta were either capable of being motorised or were already motorised as all these units, after the German attack on 31 March, were sent forward by Wavell.

Had these units been formed into a battle group in early March, when Wavell acknowledged that he would have to reinforce Neame, which so easily could have been done; then these units could have undoubtedly been in the line well before the Germans attacked. We of course will never know what difference the presence of 700 infantry men, 36 machine guns, 56 artillery pieces, 24 anti aircraft guns, mines and barbed wire might have made to the defence.

However, as the battle was far from an easy victory for the Germans fighting the existing garrison then it seems reasonable to speculate that over doubling the strength of the defence and incorporating mines and wire into the defence would have made any victory even more difficult for the attackers. Indeed, even if a victory could have been achieved by Rommel it would almost certainly have been more costly in men and materials and probably more time consuming. Rommel could neither afford to lose war materials or expend time as he was in short supply of both. Moreover, he had exceeded his orders and a rebuff at Brega may well have brought his military career to an abrupt end.

As Ronald Lewin remarks; 'If the British could have held the front at Mersa Brega much might have followed. Rommel's doubting masters might have increased their doubt, and the flow of supplies to Africa might have stopped. Rommel himself might have been submerged under a cloud'.<sup>1046</sup> Had Rommel been 'repulsed with a bloody nose, it is highly probable that he would have suffered Hitler's extreme displeasure for (a) losing the battle and (b) exceeding his brief – which was simply to reconnoitre. He would probably have been pulled back to Sirte and told to wait until 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer arrived, after which, and when told, he could essay another attack. By which time, of course, the British would have been fully rested, re-equipped, reorganised and waiting for him'.<sup>1047</sup>

Sadly, however, for the British, in the aftermath of the breakthrough, Rommel would not give Wavell's forces the chance to rest, re-equip or reorganise. He would press home his attack and inflict great damage, both directly and indirectly, on the British war effort. When Rommel resumed his offensive on 1 April he had already virtually destroyed one armoured and one infantry brigade. In the coming days and weeks his breakthrough at Brega would decimate many more units and set in train the headlong retreat of thousands of British troops. This in turn would force the British to abandon hundreds and thousands of tons of almost irreplaceable stores and equipment which Rommel and his troops would soon eagerly turn on their former owners.

In this regard two pieces of captured British equipment, which were to become an enduring memory of the war in North Africa, stand out. From 2 Armoured Division Rommel captured two Armoured Command Vehicles (ACVs), which he called Mammuten (Mammoths), and named Max and Moritz; and the pair of sun goggles he habitually wore on his peaked cap.<sup>1048</sup>

---

<sup>1046</sup> Lewin, *Rommel as a Military Commander*, p. 33.

<sup>1047</sup> Hogg, *Armour in Conflict*, p. 99.

<sup>1048</sup> Forty, *The Armies of Rommel*, p. 96.

While the loss of formed units, base troops, stores and equipment was in its self catastrophic other losses were perhaps even more grievous to future British war aims. In a desperate attempt to restore the already hopeless situation in Cyrenaica, Wavell sent forward General O'Connor and Brigadier John Combe, to help and advise Neame. Pitt was to write of this move that it was the most unfortunate move Wavell made in his long military career.<sup>1049</sup> Lewin says of Wavell's decision 'that there is probably no serious student of military history who would support this decision: since O'Connor was the experienced senior, to have influence without executive command placed him in an intolerable position, and dual control is notoriously the worst way to run a battle'.<sup>1050</sup>

The appearance of O'Connor and Combe, almost inevitably, did nothing to improve the military situation in Cyrenaica, however, their capture a few days later deprived the British Army of two of its most talented and irreplaceable senior officers.<sup>1051</sup>

Looking at the wider implications of the breakthrough at Brega we may see that Wavell's neglect of his desert flank also resulted in other fronts being put in jeopardy. Rommel's advance deprived vital resources being sent to Greece and Crete. In his desperation to halt the German advance in Cyrenaica Wavell committed aircraft and shipping which not only took casualties but because of its diversion to North Africa was not available to support the desperate struggle in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the extra aircraft and ships would not, perhaps, have reversed the outcome of the battles soon to be raging in Greece and Crete, they might possibly have saved precious lives and inflicted more damage on the enemy.

Amazingly none of the adverse consequences which resulted from the loss of Brega highlighted above seems to have brought out in Wavell any sense guilt or contrition for

---

<sup>1049</sup> Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, 1980, p. 262.

<sup>1050</sup> Lewin, p. 124

<sup>1051</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Finest Hour* (London: Book Club Associates, 1983) p. 1058.

his part in the debacle. In a letter Wavell wrote to Dill in 1942 he set out his view on his stewardship of Middle East Command and the reasons, as he saw it, for his removal:

I was very sorry, very sorry, to leave/ Middle East and should have liked to see it through there, but as the P. M. had obviously lost confidence in me, and bears the supreme responsibility, he was right to make a change of bowling, and I had had several sixes hit off me, some perhaps through bowling to orders. Anyway I had a long spell, got some wickets, and have no grouse at being taken off.<sup>1052</sup>

So there we have it, with thousands of men dead, hundreds of thousands of tons of irreplaceable military materials lost, three humiliating routes Cyrenaica, Greece and Crete, and British fortunes in the war at arguably their lowest ebb, Wavell was very sorry, very sorry. Not, however, for the catalogue of military disasters he had presided over but because he would like to have stayed in his command. Moreover, the P. M. had lost confidence in him not because of any real failure on his part; after all the several sixes hit of his bowling were only conceded because he was obeying the P. M.s orders. Consequently if there were any failures they were the P. M.s not his. On the other hand had he not taken some wickets? Had he not succeeded in clearing East Africa of its starving, demoralised and totally isolated Italian garrison? This victory, surly, justified throwing away everything won in North Africa.

This is, perhaps, the view of history Wavell genuinely believed to be true, still, as Lewin concedes; 'the resulting failures stand on record and as W. H. Auden wrote History to the defeated. May say Alas but cannot help or pardon'.<sup>1053</sup> As for comparing his time in command to an innings in cricket Wavell was perhaps, right for as George Orwell observed: 'cricket is a game full of forlorn hopes and sudden dramatic changes of fortune' which for those under Wavell's command could not have been more true.

---

<sup>1052</sup> Letter from Wavell to Dill July 26 1942. found in CAB 106/1209

<sup>1053</sup> Lewin, p. 15.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY/WORKS CONSULTED

### Books

The Military History and Information Section A. I. F. (Middle East) *Active Service: With Australia in the Middle East* (Canberra: The Board of Management of the Australian War Memorial, 1941)

Ambrose, Stephen E., *Eisenhower Soldier and Statesman* (New York: Touchstone, 1990)

Argent, J. N. L., *Target Tank 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Anti-Tank Regiment* (Parramatta: History Committee, 1952)

Barclay C. N., *The History of the Northumberland Fusiliers in the Second World War 1919-45* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1952)

Barnett, Correlli, *The Desert Generals* (London: William Kimber, 1960)

Barthorp, Michael, *The Zulu War* (Poole: Blandford Press, 1980)

Bastin, Jeremy, *The Norfolk Yeomanry in Peace and War* (Fakenham: Iceni Press, 1986)

Baxter, Ian, *Images of the Afrika-Korps* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008)

Baynes, John, *The Forgotten Victory* (London: Brassey's, 1989)

Bellamy, Christopher, *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Bennett, Ralph, *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1989)

Benbow, Tim, *Naval Warfare 1914-1918* (London: Amber Books, 2008)

Berger, Stephan, Ed, *Writing History Theory & Practice* (London: Arnold, 2003)

Bevis, Mark, *British and Commonwealth Armies 1939-45 Supplement Volume 1* (Solihull: Helion & Co, 2005)

Bickers, Richard Townshend, *The Desert Air War*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1991)

Biddle, Stephen, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Bidwell, Shelford, *Gunners at War* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1970)

Bishop, Chris, Editor, *The Encyclopaedia of Weapons of WWII* (London: Amber Books, 2007)

Blaxland, G., *The Buffs Royal East Kent Regiment* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972)

Bolitho, Hector, *The Galloping Third* (London: John Murray, 1963)

Breisach, Ernst, *Historiography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007)

Brown, John Sloan., *Draftee Division* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986)

Bryant, Arthur, *The Turn of the Tide* (London: Reprint Society, 1958)

Buckingham, William F., *Tobruk: The Great Siege 1941-42* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008)

Carell, Paul, *The Foxes of the Desert*: translated from the German by Mervyn Savill (London: Macdonald, 1960)

Carver, Michael, *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2002)

Church, John, *Military Vehicles of World War 2* (New York: Crescent Books, 1985)

Churchill Winston, *The Second World War Volume III* (London: Cassell & Co, 1950)

Clausewitz, Carl Von, *On War*; Editors Michael Howard & Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984)

Clausewitz, Carl Von, *On War*; Editor Tom Griffith (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997)

Clifford, Alexander, *Three Against Rommel* (London: Harrap & Co, 1943)

Coats, Peter, *Of Generals and Gardens* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976)

Colville, J. R., *Man of Valour* (London: Collins, 1972)

Connell, John, *Wavell Scholar & Soldier* (London: Collins, 1964)

Cooper, Artemis, *Cairo in the War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989)

Cox, Geoffrey, *A Tale of Two Battles* (London: William Kimber & Co, 1987)

Crow, Duncan, *British & Commonwealth Armoured Formations 1919-46* (Windsor: Profile Publications Ltd, 1971)

Cull, Brian, *Hurricanes Over Tobruk* (London: Grub Street, 1999)

Cunningham, Viscount, *A Sailors Odyssey* (London: Hutchinson, 1951)

Davis, Brian L., *The British Army in WWII* (London: Greenhill Books, 1990)

De Guingand, Francis, *Operation Victory* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1950)

Deighton, Len, *Blood, Tears and Folly* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993)

Delaforce, Patrick, *Taming the Panzers* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000)

Delaney, John, *Fighting the Desert Fox* (London: Arms & Armour, 1998)

Dey, J. H., *Cairo to Berlin The 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery 1939-1945* (Fleet: Arcturus Press, 2005)

Dixon, Norman, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico, 1994)

Dudley, Clarke, *The Eleventh at War 1934 – 1945* (London: Michael Joseph, 1952),

Dupuy, T. N., *Understanding War: History and Theory of Combat* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992)

Dull, Jonathan R., *The Age of the Ship of the Line* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009)

Egremont, Max, *Under Two Flags* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997)

Ellis, Chris, *Tanks of World War 2* (London: Octopus Books Ltd, 1981)

Farran, Roy, *Winged Dagger* (London: Cassell Military Classics, 1998)

Fergusson, Bernard, *Wavell Portrait of a Soldier* (London: Collins, 1961)

Ferguson, Niall, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2004)

Fernyhough, A. H., *History of the Royal Ordnance Corps 1920-1945* (London: Royal Army Ordnance Corps, 1967)

- Fletcher, David, *The Great Tank Scandal* (London: HMSO, 1989)
- Forty, George, *Tanks Across the Desert* (London: William Kimber, 1981)
- Forty, George, *The Armies of Rommel* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1999)
- Forty, George, *The First Victory: O'Connor's Desert Triumph* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990)
- Foss, Christopher. F., *Tanks and Fighting Vehicles* (London: Salamander Books, 1977)
- Fraser, David, *The Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel* (London: Harper Collins, 1994)
- Gamble, Ronnie, *The Coleraine Battery, The History of 6 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery RA (SA) 1939-1945* (Coleraine: Causeway Museum Service, 2006)
- Glover, Michael, *An Improvised War* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987)
- Gottschalk, Louis, *Understanding History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961)
- Gray, Colin, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)
- Greacen, Lavinia, *Chink a Biography* (London: Macmillan Ltd, 1989)
- Green, William, *War Planes of the Second World War: Volume 2* (London: Macdonald & Co, 1961)
- Gregg, Victor, & Stroud, Rick, *Rifleman* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011)
- Grierson, Edward, *The Imperial Dream* (London: Collins, 1972)
- Guedalla, Philip, *Middle East 1940-1942: A Study in Air Power* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944)
- Gudgin, Peter, *Armoured Fire Power* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997)
- Habesch, David, *The Army's Navy* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2001)
- Hallows, Ian S., *Regiments and Corps of the British Army* (London: New Orchard Press, 1994)
- Hamilton, Stuart, *Armoured Odyssey* (London: Tom Donovan, 1995)
- Harding, John, *Harding of Petherton* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1978)

Harrison, Frank, *Tobruk: The Great Siege Reassessed* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1996)

Hastings, R.H.W.S., *The Rifle Brigade in the Second World War* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950)

Heckmann, Wolf, *Rommel's War in Africa* (London: Granada, 1982)

Heseltine, Richard, *Pippin's Progress* (Suffolk: Silver Horse Press, 2001)

Hinsley, F. H., *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Volume 1 Its Influence on Strategy and Operations* (London: HMSO, 1979)

Hogg, Ian V., *Armour in Conflict* (London: Jane's Publishing Company, 1980)

Holmes, Richard, *Tommy* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005)

Horne, Alistair, *To Lose a Battle France 1940* (London: Papermac, 1990)

Horrocks, Brian, *A Full Life* (London: Collins, 1960)

Howarth, Tony, *Twentieth Century History* (Harlow: Longman Group, 1979)

Humble, Richard, *Crusader* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987)

Hunt, David, *A Don at War* (London: William Kimber, 1966)

Ireland, Bernard, *The War in the Mediterranean 1940-1943* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1993)

Irving, David, *The Trail of the Fox* (London: Papermac, 1985)

Jackson, Julian, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Jackson, W. G. F., *The North African Campaign 1940-43* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1975)

Jefford, C. G., *R. A. F. Squadrons* (Shrewsbury: Airlife Publishing, 1988)

Jentz, Thomas L., *Panzer Truppen* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 1996)

Johns, F. H, Monk, J. A. C & Langrishe, P. J. D., *The History of the 7<sup>th</sup> Medium Regiment Royal Artillery 1939 – 1945* (Sheffield: Historical Committee, 1951)

Johnson, Curt, *Artillery: The Big Guns go to War* (London: Octopus Books, 1975)

Kearey, P, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Geology* (London: Penguin Reference, 2001),

Keegan, John, *The Mask of Command* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987)

Keegan, John, *Churchill's Generals* (London: Cassell, 2005)

Kennedy, John, *The Business of War* (London: Hutchinson, 1957)

Kitchen, Martin, *Rommel's War in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Karnow, Stanley, *Vietnam a History* (London: Pimlico, 1999)

Kershaw, Robert, *Tank Men: The Human Story of Tanks at War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009)

Lane, Peter, *The Labour Party* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1973)

Latimer, Jon, *Tobruk: Rommel's Opening Move* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001)

Leakey, Ray, *A Tank Commander with Nine Lives* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999)

Lewin, Ronald, *Rommel as a Military Commander* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004)

Lewin, Ronald, *The Chief* (London: Hutchinson, 1980)

Lewis, Adrian R., *Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory* (Stroud: Tempus Books, 2004)

Lewis, P. J. & English, I. R., *Into Battle with the Durhams* (London: Stamp Exchange Ltd, 1990)

Liddell-Hart, Basil, *History of the Second World War* (London: Book Club Associates, 1973)

Liddell-Hart, B. H., *Rommel Papers* (London: Collins, 1953)

Lindsay, T. M., *Sherwood Rangers* (London: Burrup, Mathieson & Co, 1952)

Livezey, William E., *Mahan on Sea Power* (Norman Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986)

Lucas, James, *War in the Desert* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1982)

Lyman, Robert, *The Longest Siege: Tobruk the Battle that Saved North Africa* (London: Macmillan, 2009)

Macksey, Kenneth, *Military Errors of World War Two* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1987)

Macksey, Kenneth, *The Guinness Book of Tank Facts & Feats* (London: Guinness Superlatives Ltd, 1972)

Martell, John, *The Twentieth Century World: Third Edition* (London: Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1980)

Marwick, Arthur, *The Nature of History* (London: Macmillan Press, 1973)

McCarthy, Peter, & Syron, Mike, *Panzerkrieg* (London: Robinson, 2003)

McCorquodale, D., *King's Dragoon Guards A History of the King's Dragoon Guards 1938-1945* (Printed for the Regiment in 1950).

Mitcham, Samuel W. Jr., *Rommel's Desert War* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2007)

Moore, William, *Panzer Bait* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991)

Morewood, Steven, *The British Defence of Egypt 1935 – 1940* (London: Frank Cass, 2005)

Neame, Philip, *Playing with Strife* (London: Harap, 1947)

Neillands, Robin, *The Desert Rats* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991)

O'Gowan, Eric Dorman, *History of the Second World War* (London: Purnell, 1967)

Peniakoff, Vladimir, *Private Army* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1950)

Peter, Dr. Laurence. J., *Peters Quotations* (New York: William Morrow, 1992)

Pitt, Barrie, *The Crucible of War* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1980)

Pitt, Barrie, *The Crucible of War* (London: Futura Books Ltd, 1981)

Place, Timothy Harrison, *Military Training in the British Army 1940-1944* (London: Frank Cass Publishing, 2000),

Playfair, I. O. S., *The Mediterranean and Middle East* (London: HMSO, 1956)

Pocock, Tom, *Horatio Nelson* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

Powell, Colin, & Persico, Joseph E., *A Soldier's Way* (London: Hutchinson, 1995)

Powell, Geoffrey, *The History of the Green Howards* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1992)

Raugh, Harold E. Jr., *Wavell in the Middle East 1939-1941* (London: Brassey's 1993)

Rowan-Robinson, Henry, *Wavell in the Middle East* (London: Hutchinson, 1943)

Schmidt, H. W., *With Rommel in the Desert* (London: Harrap, 1951)

Schofield, Victoria, *Soldier & Statesman* (London: John Murray, 2007)

Sebag-Montefiore, Hugo, *Enigma: The Battle for the Code* (London: Cassell, 2004)

Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Atlantis, 1980)

Sheehan, Neil, *A Bright Shinning Lie* (New York: Random House, 1988)

Smithers, A. J., *Rude Mechanical* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987)

Stone, Norman, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (Ware: Wordsworth Reference, 1993)

Strawson, John, *If by Chance* (London: Macmillan Ltd, 2003)

Strawson, John, *The Battle for North Africa* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1969)

Stevens, G. R., *Fourth Indian Division* (Toronto: McLaren and Son, 1948)

Tedder, Lord, *With Prejudice* (London: Cassell & Co, 1988)

Terraine, John, *The Right of the Line* (London: Sceptre Books, 1988)

Thorpe, D. R., *Eden: The Life and Times of Anthony Eden* (London: Pimlico Books, 2004)

Tute, Warren, *The North African War* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1976)

Vanderveen, Bart, *Historic Military Vehicles Directory* (London: Battle of Britain Print, 1989)



- Van Creveld, Martin, *Command in War* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985)
- Van Creveld, Martin, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Verney, G. L., *The Desert Rats* (London: Greenhill Books, 1990)
- Wake, Hereward & Deedes, W. F., *Swift & Bold* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949)
- Watts, Anthony, *Submarines and Submersibles* (London: Ward Lock Ltd, 1976)
- West, Don, *Fox Killed in the Open* (Cambridge: Warrior Press, 1992)
- Whiting, Charles & Taylor, Eric, *The Yorkshire Regiments in WWII Fighting Tykes* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1993)
- Willett, Bill, Editor, *Philips New World Atlas* (London: Guild Publishing, 1991)
- Wilmot, Chester, *The Struggle for Europe* (London: Collins, 1952)
- Wilson, Lord, *Eight Years Overseas 1939-1947* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1948)
- Wilson, Edward, *Press on Regardless: The Story of the Fifth Royal Tank Regiment in WWII* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2003)
- Winterbotham, F. W., *Secret and Personal* (London: William Kimber, 1969)
- Wood, Rex, *One Mans Desert* (London: William Kimber, 1986)
- Woollcombe, Robert, *The Campaigns of Wavell 1939-1943* (London: Cassell, 1959)
- Wynn, Humphrey & Young, Susan, *Prelude to Overlord* (Shrewsbury: Airlife Publishing, 1983)
- Young, Peter, Ed, *Decisive Battles of the Second World War* (London: Bison Books, 1988)

### **Imperial War Museum Archive**

L. E. Tutt, Found in Imperial War Museum Archive Ref 85/35/1

A. G. Brook, Information found in letter in Imperial War Museum Archive p. 4/5.  
Reference No 80/38/1

## **Journals**

Trevor J. Constable, Article in *The Journal of Historical Review*, The Little-Known Story of Percy Hobart, They Called Him 'Hobo' (January/February 1999 Issue, Volume 18, number 1).

Purnell Publishing, *Purnell's History of the Second World War* (London; 1967)

Andrew Sumerau, *Why Vietnam was Lost*, Article in American Thinker (El Cerrito, CA, 5 May 2005)

Richard Cahill, *The Image of "Black and Tans" in late Mandate Palestine*: Jerusalem Quarterly (Winter 2009 issue 40)

John Foley, *History of the Second World War* Volume 2 Issue 7 (London: Purnell, 1967)

## **Newspapers**

*The Times*: 17 February 2005 Obituary of Major General George Crookenden 1920-2005

*The Independent* 5 May 2011 Martin Childs, Article on Professor Richard Holmes

## **Public Records Office Documents**

War Diary 2 RTR WO 169/1410

War Diary 1940, 3 RTR WO 169/236

War Diary 5 RTR WO 169/1414

War Diary 6 RTR WO 169/1415

War Diary 7 RTR WO 169/1416

War Diary 1 Regiment R.H.A. WO 169/1426

War Diary 3 Regiment R.H.A. WO 169/1428

War Diary 51<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment Artillery WO 169/1454

War Diary 104 Regiment R.H.A. WO 169/1431

War Diary 7 Medium Regiment Royal Artillery WO 169/1491

War Diary 3 HUSSARS WO 169/1385

War Diary 1 KING'S DRAGOON GUARDS WO 169/1384

War Diary 1 KRRC WO 169/1732

War Diary 143 Field Park Troop RE WO 169/1887

War Diary Support Group 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Division WO 169/1159

War Diary 37<sup>th</sup> LAA National Archives WO 169/1656

Neame's Report on Operations in Cyrenaica 27<sup>th</sup> February to 7<sup>th</sup> April 1941 CAB  
106/767

### **Internet sites**

The 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Veterans Association, 2002-2008, <http://www.88infdiv.org/>  
(Accessed on 21-04-09)

Bayonet Strength <http://www.bayonetstrength150.com/> (Accessed on 21-04-09)

Otto Ruprecht <http://www.thecheers.org/.../article-2374-Mersa-El-Brega.html>-United  
States (Accessed 21-06-2010)

Manx Aviation Preservation Society: <http://www.maps.iofm.net/bofors-guns.htm>  
(Accessed 21-03-2010)

[http://www.generals.dk/.../Rimington/Reginald Gordon Ward/Great Britain.html](http://www.generals.dk/.../Rimington/Reginald%20Gordon%20Ward/Great%20Britain.html)  
(Accessed 21-06-2010)

<http://www.memorablequotations.com/rommel.htm> (Accessed 21-07-2010)

<http://www.afa.org/quotes/quotes> (Accessed 23-05-2010)

### **Liddell-Hart Centre London**

O'CONNOR: 4/3/14 1948, 1949

Letters from Sir Arthur Bryant, Major Gen R J Collins, Brig H B Latham, Cabinet  
Office Historical Section and copy letter from Gen Lord Ismay referring to the  
narrative. P 5

O'CONNOR: 4/3/15 1941 Apr

Narrative by Neame of desert operations, 'Operations in Cyrenaica from 27th Feb 1941  
when Lt Gen P Neame assumed command until his capture on 7th April 1941'.

Including situation on assuming command; condition and size of British forces in  
Cyrenaica; requests for reinforcements for defence of Cyrenaica, Mar; detail of the  
German advance and British withdrawal, Mar-Apr. With sketch map of Cyrenaica. P 11

O'CONNOR: 4/3/16 1941 Apr 24

Copy made by O'Connor of Neame's account of the desert operations. P 7

O'CONNOR: 4/3/17 1941 May 28

Letter from Neame to Wadsworth, enclosing his account of desert operations, and letter to Neame's wife Berta. P 2

O'CONNOR: 4/3/18 1940s Copies of comments by Brig J F B Combe on the account of operations in Cyrenaica by Neame, and on various letters of Neame and O'Connor. P 7

O'CONNOR: 4/3/19 1960s

Comments by Combe on Neame's account of the desert operations, and on various letters of O'Connor and Neame. P 6

O'CONNOR: 4/3/20-22 Account of by Lt Col J F B Combe, Cdr 11 Hussars, of First Libyan campaign and his later capture, 1960-1967

Letter from General Ismay to O'Connor 19-01-1949 found in O'Connor papers Liddell-Hart Centre Doc 4/3/14

## **Maps**

Defence Mapping Agency Map of Libya Series TCP Sheet H-4A Edition 3 1996

Detailed maps War Diary of 7 RTR Found at PRO WO 169/1416 Also War Diary B/O Battery 1 RHA WO 169/1436

Major-General W. G. Stevens, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-1945* (Historical Publications Branch, Wellington: 1962). Found in the section by R. L. Kay, *The Left Hook El Agheila*, (Wellington: Historical Branch, 1950), p.26.

Purnell's *History of the Second World War* Vol 3 Issue 7

## **Universities**

Sir Philip Mitchell papers, Rhodes House Library Oxford, Oxford University

Anthony Eden papers, Avon Papers, University of Birmingham Library

## **White Paper and Miscellaneous Sources**

Kazin, Alfred, (1915-1998) U.S. literary critic

British Government White Paper, *The Statement Relating to Defence*, Published London 4 March 1935.

Minutes of the meeting of the 296<sup>th</sup> Committee of Imperial Defence, *Documents on Foreign Policy*, Series 2, Volume xix, no 15.

CAB/65/14/10 W. M. (40) 800<sup>th</sup> Conclusions. Minute 2. 11<sup>th</sup> July 1940

CAB 106/1209 Extracts from Field Marshal Sir John Dill's papers received from Major Lord Wavell. Extracts from Field Marshal Sir John Dill's papers received from Major Lord Wavell War Cabinet and Cabinet Office.

WO 106/5127 Visit by Lieut Colonel G.C. Grimshaw: Scheme for recapture of British Somaliland: demi-official correspondence between General Wavell and General Sir John Dill. Visit by Lieut Colonel G.C. Grimshaw: Scheme for recapture of British Somaliland.

PREM 3/294/1 Report on Dill mission to Middle East Feb/April 1941.

WO 106/2133 Operations in the Western desert: dispatch by Gen. Archibald Wavell Commander in Chief Middle East. Operations in the Western desert: dispatch by Gen. Archibald Wavell Commander in Chief Middle East MIDDLE EAST WAR OF 1939-1945 War Office: Directorate. Date: 1940 – 1941.

WO 216/60 Lessons of the operations in the Western Desert: report by Major-General Gambier Parry. Lessons of the operations in the Western Desert: report by Major-General Gambier Parry War Office: Office of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff: Papers. Date: 1940.

U.S. War Department publication, *Tactical and Technical Trends*: Article entitled; Use of Captured Italian Weapons found in issue No. 7, September. 10, 1942.

Mike Windle & Stuart Swan, North East Yorkshire Geology Trust NE Yorkshire Geology Trust 5 Station Workshops Station Road Robin Hood's Bay YO22 4TG

## **Interviews**

Interview conducted by the author with David Hurst-Brown at his home on 14 January 2011.

